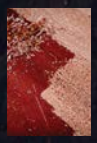

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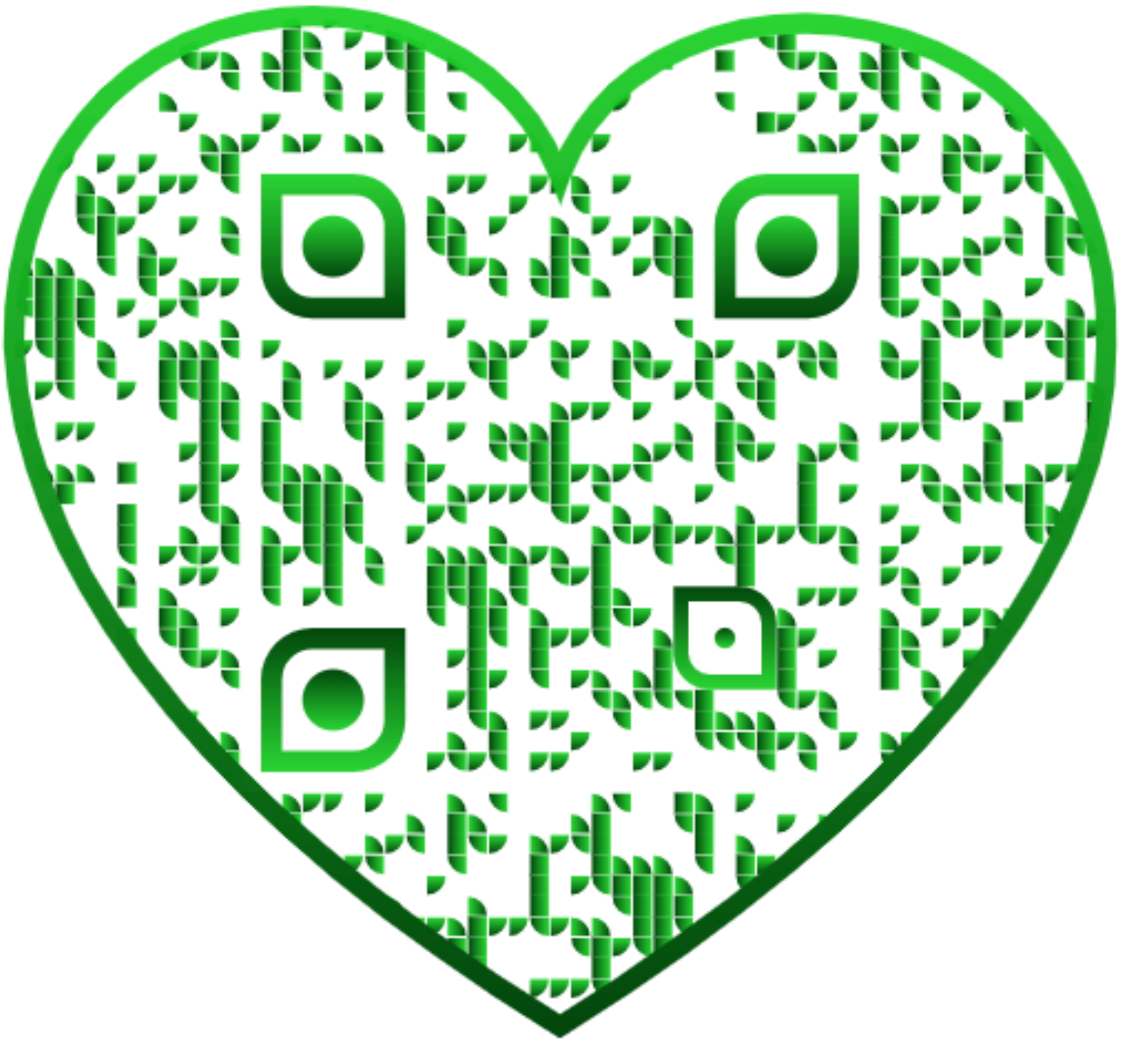

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The polls are open!

Next month, you'll see a few changes around here, but for longterm readers it shouldn't prove to be too painful. Back in 1991, this publication was launched under the banner of *The Guitar Magazine* and enjoyed many years of success while branded as such. I remember discovering the mag as a teenager in the Britpop era and feeling like I'd found a title that really spoke to me as a guitarist. When you think about it, '*The Guitar Magazine*' is about as perfect a name for a magazine about guitars as it's possible to dream up. You might even say that it does what it says on the tin.

Following that train of thought to its logical conclusion, from the August 2017 issue onwards (on sale from 7 July) we're rolling back to our original name: *The Guitar Magazine*. We'll also have a new web address, which we'll reveal soon.

If you are a bass player reading this, don't panic! We still intend to feature bass gear in the mag – it is a type of guitar, after all. And whatever your taste in guitar or bass gear, now is the perfect time for you to tell us exactly what content you'd like to see more of in the magazine. Share your opinions with the team over at **www.guitar-bass.net/survey/2017** and you'll automatically be entered into a competition to win a fantastic Artist 15 valve combo worth £649 courtesy of our friends at Blackstar Amplification.

Finally, I'd like to welcome our new art editor John Thackray onboard. His knowledge of craft beer is second to none, and as you flick through this month's mag I'm sure you'll agree that he's doing a great job already. See you next month when there will be a different sign above the door but the content will be better than ever...

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Turn to **page 54** to take advantage of this month's special *Guitar & Bass* subscription offer.

In this issue...

THIS MONTH'S EXPERTS...

DAVE HUNTER

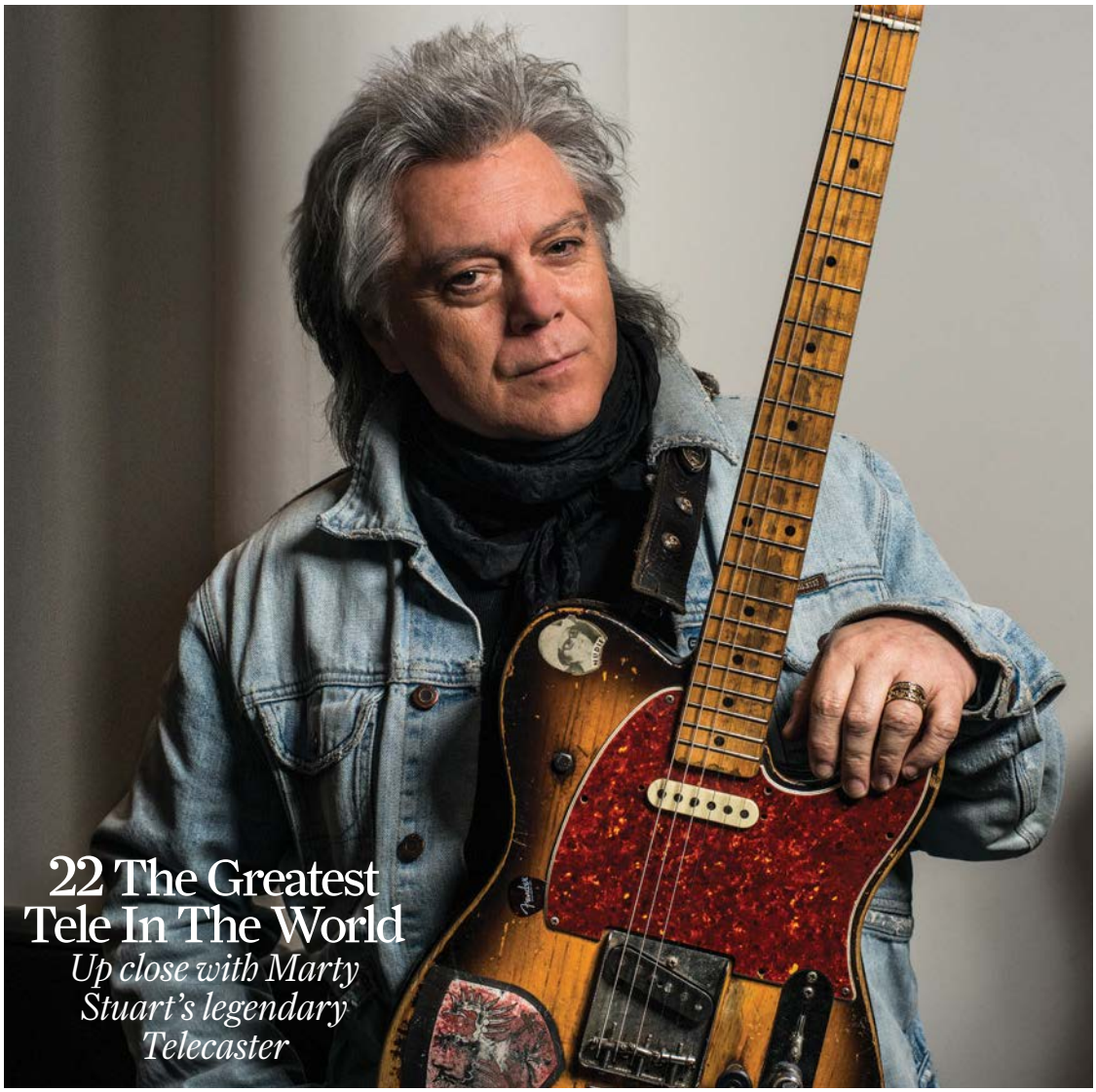
Dave Hunter is a writer and musician who has worked in the US and the UK. A former editor of this title, he is the author of *The Guitar Amp Handbook*, *Guitar Effects Pedals*, *Amped* and *The Fender Telecaster*. Check out his column on p12

HUW PRICE

Huw spent 16 years as a pro audio engineer, working with the likes of David Bowie, Primal Scream and NIck Cave. His book, *Recording Guitar & Bass*, was published in 2002, leading into his career in guitar journalism. He also builds and maintains guitars, amps & pedals

RICHARD PURVIS

A reformed drummer, Richard has been gigging for over 20 years as a guitarist and bassist, and working as a music journalist for almost as long. He also composes music for television, and is legally married to his 1966 Gibson Melody Maker



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The Money Shot

The subject of this month's Money Shot is a very special amplifier indeed, kindly loaned to us by our friends at Gardiner Houlgate (www.guitar-auctions.co.uk). Lot 271 in the 15 June 2017 auction is a 1960 Magnatone 190 Professional formerly owned by electric blues legend Rory Gallagher. The 40-watt combo was one of Gallagher's favourite studio amps and its array of tones ranges from beautiful, harmonically complex chime to ragged and raucous overdrive. The stencilled and stickered flightcase is almost as appealing as the amp itself and it featured in a publicity shot for the Irish bluesman's final studio album, *Fresh Evidence*. It'll no doubt make a very cool and toneful addition to someone's collection... G

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FLAT
BRIGHT
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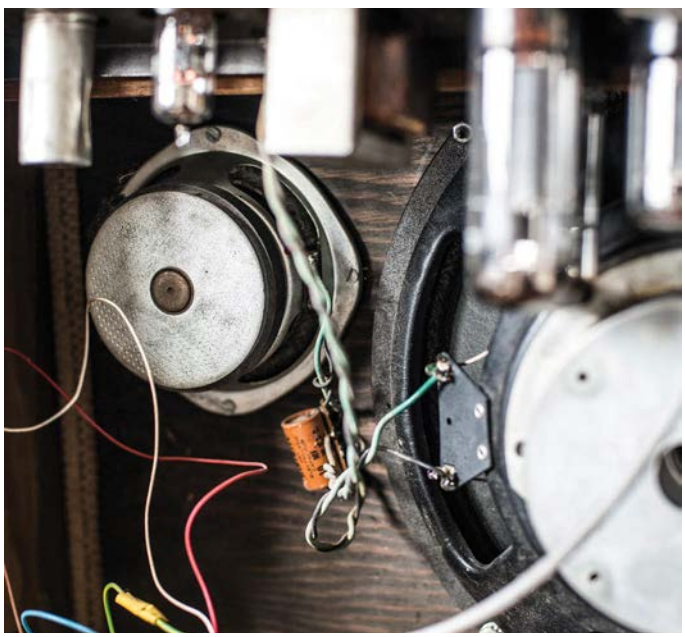

Opening bars...

THE VINYL FESTIVAL IS COMING!

Get your tickets now for the UK's biggest celebration of all things vinyl – featuring Huey Morgan, Steve Lamacq, Tim Burgess, a record fair, hardware, food and more...

&B's sister title, *Long Live Vinyl*, has launched The Vinyl Festival – a brand new two-day London event brings bring together music, food and beer in one unmissable celebration that will delight music fans and vinyl obsessives alike.

Held in London's Docklands on 23 and 24 September, *Long Live Vinyl* has hired out The Printworks, London's most talked-about new music venue, for a weekend that will rank alongside Record Store Day as a highlight in every music lover's calendar. A-list artists, DJs and vinyl aficionados will headline both days, taking to the main stage for Q&As and to spin some of their favourite and most cherished records.

The Vinyl Festival will of course be a crate-digger's paradise, with pop-up shops, indie label stalls and second-hand traders. For audiophiles, there will be hi-fi, turntables and hardware to browse and test out. There'll be gallery exhibitions of classic artwork and sleeve designers, and live music, too, with sets from some amazing turntablists. Keep refreshed with craft beer and exciting street food. Put all of this together and you have, in short, *Long Live Vinyl*... live!

The Venue

The Printworks only opened in January this year, but has already become the most talked-about music venue in London. In March, Gorillaz took over the space for a secret gig, when Damon Albarn's cartoon troupe performed their new album *Humanz* in its entirety, with guests including Noel Gallagher, De La Soul and Jean-Michel Jarre. In April, The Printworks celebrated the 40th anniversary of Studio 54, the iconic New York club, with a performance by the 500-strong Some Voices community choir. In July, Afropunk will take over the venue for its two-day *We Are The People* festival, with Lianne La Havas and Thundercat headlining.

The Headliners

At The Vinyl Festival, you'll hear from musicians and DJs who have spent their whole lives recording, playing, collecting and curating music on vinyl. And the first four headliners have just been confirmed – Steve Lamacq, Tim Burgess, Huey Morgan and Edith Bowman.

With The Charlatans, Tim Burgess has just released the band's 13th album, *Different Days* – featuring guest appearances from Paul Weller and Johnny Marr – while last year, he published a brilliant account of his record-collecting exploits, *Tim Book Two: Vinyl Adventures From Istanbul To San Francisco*.

One of the UK's most important figures in UK radio, Steve Lamacq has become a linchpin of BBC 6 Music since he joined the station in 2005 after 16 years with Radio 1, and has recently presented a series of landmark documentaries on BBC Radio 2 including *Biff! Bang! Pow! The Story Of Creation Records*.

Possibly the only musician to have been a panelist on both *Never Mind The Buzzcocks* and *Question Time*, Huey Morgan scored three Top 10 albums as the frontman and guitarist in Fun Lovin' Criminals, before becoming a mainstay on BBC Radio 2 and BBC 6 Music. He recently published his first book, *Rebel Heroes: The Renegades Of Music & Why We Still Need Them*.

Heading up the mainstream vinyl revival, Edith Bowman regularly dedicates the last hour of her Virgin Radio breakfast show exclusively to vinyl. She's also a passionate fan of film soundtracks, and a recent book, *Great British Festivals*, compiled her reviews and photographs of some of the country's best- and lesser-known events.

Early Bird Tickets

For a limited time only, you can get your hands on Early Bird tickets to The Vinyl Festival, saving you a tidy 25 per cent off the standard ticket prices. Tickets start from just £16, with day, weekend and VIP packages available. For more info and to bag your Early Bird tickets, head to www.thevinylfestival.com.

Find out more via The Vinyl Festival's official website – www.thevinylfestival.com – and on its brand-new social-media pages: facebook.com/vinylfestuk, @vinylfestuk on Twitter and @vinylfestuk on Instagram

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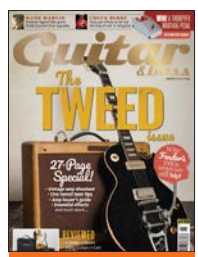

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CHRIS CORNELL

1964-2017

Guitar & Bass was saddened to hear of the death of Soundgarden frontman Chris Cornell at the age of just 52. The singer and guitarist was found hanged in his hotel room on 18 May in an apparent suicide, following Soundgarden's show at Detroit's Fox Theatre the previous evening.

Seattle-born Cornell formed Soundgarden in 1984 with guitarist Kim Thayil and bassist Hiro Yamamoto, originally with Cornell on drums and vocals, but he soon moved into the frontman role. Soundgarden signed to Sub-Pop in 1987, and were one of the leading bands in the early Seattle grunge scene.

In 1989, they became the first grunge band to sign a major label deal, and released third album, *Badmotorfinger*, in 1991. It would see the band take a huge leap in songcraft, with Cornell's soulful, gritty vocals and remarkable range being showcased on the likes of *Jesus Christ Pose* and *Rusty Cage*.

The band's commercial breakthrough would come with the release of *Superunknown* in 1994. The album saw Cornell continue his rapid development as a songwriter, typified by the frequent key changes and interval jumps displayed in the band's biggest hit, the Grammy-winning *Black Hole Sun*.

Despite the success of *Superunknown*, Cornell was keen to push the band further away from their trademark heavy guitar sound, leading to their break up in 1998, following fifth album, *Down On The Upside*.

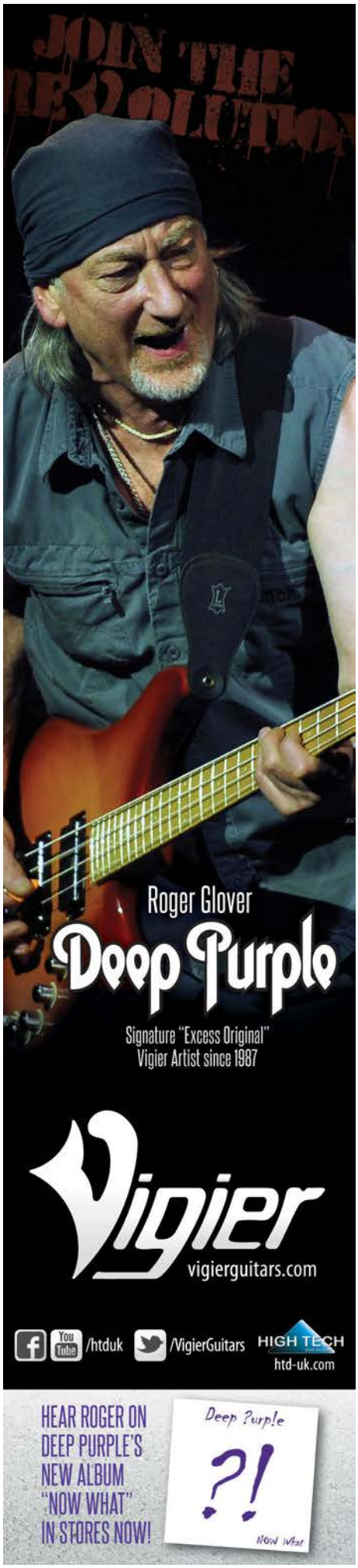
Cornell struck out on his own, and his first of four solo albums, *Euphoria Morning*, would showcase a gentler side – a layered, textural album that also showed off his harmonically creative guitar style. The lure of a band was strong for Cornell, however, and following the departure of Zack de la Rocha from Rage Against The Machine, Cornell joined with the remaining band members to form Audioslave. "He stepped to the microphone and sang the song and I couldn't believe it. It didn't just sound good. It didn't sound great. It sounded transcendent," said Tom Morello of Cornell. "When there is an irreplaceable chemistry from the first moment, you can't deny it."

Audioslave's 2002 debut was a global success, spawning hits including *Cochise* and *Gasoline*, however Cornell's personal problems nearly derailed the band. He'd struggled with substance and alcohol abuse since his Soundgarden days, but they came to a head just before the album's release. Cancelling a slot on the Ozzfest tour, Cornell checked himself into a rehab facility for alcoholism in – he would remain sober for the rest of his life.

Cornell recorded two further albums with Audioslave, and continued to stretch himself as a solo artist, exploring blues and folk, performing solo at the Montreuax Jazz Festival, and recording a critically acclaimed live album, *Songbook,* which also showcased his growth into a fine acoustic player.

After a 12-year break, Soungarden reunited in 2010, and released their sixth album, *King Animal*, in 2012. In recent years, Cornell also reunited with members of Pearl Jam to mark 25 years of their Temple Of The Dog album, and rejoined Audioslave on stage for a one-off gig at the start of 2017.

Cornell will be remembered as one of the most iconic rock vocalists of all time, who inspired a generation of singers that followed him, though few could compete with his range and versatility. He was also a creative and prolific songwriter with an eye for unexpected key changes and interesting chords, and a hugely underrated guitar player. He's survived by his second wife, Vicky Karayiannis, and his three children. He will be greatly missed.



DAVE HUNTER
Dave Hunter is a writer and musician who has worked in the US and the UK. A former editor of this title, he is the author of numerous books including *The Guitar Amp Handbook*, *Guitar Effects Pedals*, *Amped* and *The Fender Telecaster*.

Letters from *America*

LONGHORN AMPS STAMPEDE

'Tweed-meets-Dumble' is the aim of this Stampede combo from Texan firm, Longhorn Amps. **DAVE HUNTER** takes the bull by the horns...

When you hear the term 'Texas tone', you might think primarily about tweed amps – and the go-to cabinet covering of Texas boutique maker, Longhorn Amps, would appear to uphold that preconception. But just like the eclectic sounds and diverse rigs of the most famous Texan guitarists, however – from the sleazy rock of Billy Gibbons to the pristine jazz-blues of Eric Johnson, through to the incendiary stylings of the brothers Vaughan – Longhorn's Terry Wright puts quite a mélange of influences into his designs. In fact, on closer inspection the Stampede exhibits very little tweed on the inside, and although you wouldn't know it from the outside, it's actually a clever take on a Dumble-style circuit. So instead of tweedy tones, it aims to deliver sparkling American cleans and juicy, singing overdrive in one compact yet powerful combo. It's a serious performance tool for serious players, and a lot of amp in a package about the size of a blackface Deluxe Reverb.

Although you wouldn't know it from the outside, it's actually a clever take on a Dumble-style circuit

It's nice to see a Dumble-style amp couched in something other than the traditional aesthetics. That squared-off cabinetry, with the ridge between control panel and grille? Meh, never did much for me, and always looked a bit 'home-brew' somehow, too. In fairness, that's kinda what Dumble originally was – just very, very high-quality home-brew!

This cab might be described as more 'advanced blackface' in format: the top edge is cut back to allow easier access to the controls, and the speaker baffle

KEY FEATURES

Longhorn Amps Stampede

- **CONTACT** longhornamps.com
- **PRICE** £2,582 (approx, excluding shipping, VAT and other duties)
- **CONTROLS** Volume, treble, middle, bass, reverb, gain, volume, master, presence
- **OUTPUT** 50W (approx)
- **VALVES** 4x 12AX7 and 1x 12AT7 in the preamp and PI, 2x 6L6GC output tubes, solid-state rectification
- **FEATURES** 3-button footswitch (included) for overdrive, mid-boost, reverb; external bias points; passive series effects loop
- **SPEAKER** 12" Celestion G12H Creamback
- **DIMENSIONS** 559 x 483 x 267mm
- **WEIGHT** 23kg/51lbs

is more acutely back-angled to enhance self-monitoring on stage. In the case of this 1x12 Stampede combo, the thing looks authentically road-worn, comfortably rustic, and appropriately high-end all at once – no mean feat.

The higher power-handling capabilities of the Creamback line is clearly serving Celestion well, and these speakers seem to be popping up everywhere lately. This 50-watt amp carries the G12H variant, which has a 75-watt power-handling capability, and a heavier magnet for tighter lows and crisper highs.

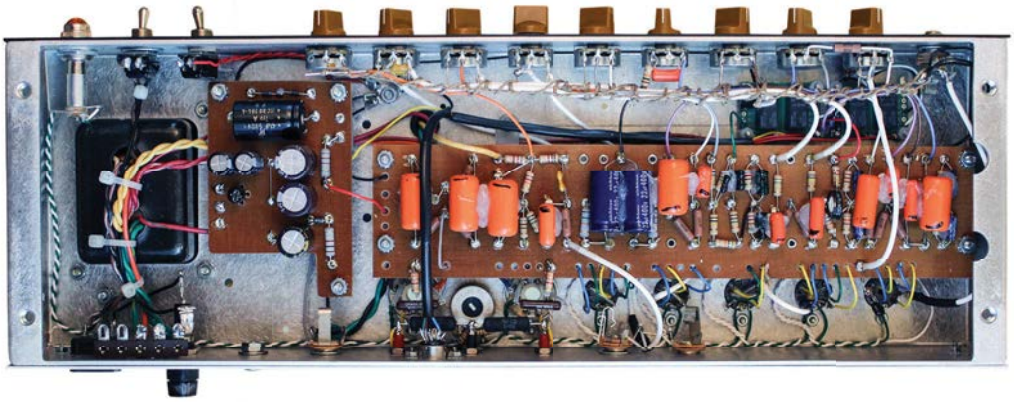
Those already familiar with the average Dumble-style control panel will find no surprises here, yet there's everything you need to dial in bold, pristine cleans, to send it via two extra gain stages for onboard overdrive, or – with the footswitch plugged in – to add a mid boost to further fatten either clean or lead tones. Doing a little more than most such buttons, the footswitch for the reverb actually takes that circuit entirely out of the signal path, for unimpeded dry tones.

The back panel has an output for just a single eight-ohm speaker, since that's what the cab carries, but does supply bias-test points for the 6L6GC output tubes, along with a passive series effects. Preamp duties are achieved with a compliment of four 12AX7 tubes, and there's a 12AT7 in the phase inverter.

"My intent for this amp was to be a grab-and-go gigging combo, that would work for multiple genres," Wright says, confirming my suspicions of the amp's purpose. "I personally lean more toward the blues, but country acts are also very prevalent in this part of the world." Add the lush reverb, thoroughly gained-up drive stage, and mid-boost of course, and you might expect to go well beyond those genres, too.

Inside the custom-made aluminium chassis, Wright's wiring work is extremely tidy, making a busy circuit like this one appear artfully fluid. SBE orange drop signal capacitors (long a D-style favourite) meet a mix of carbon-film and carbon-comp resistors on the board, sandwiched between Alpha pots and a pairing of ceramic sockets for the output tubes and phenolic for the preamp tubes. F&T and Nichicon electrolytic capacitors cover filtering duties, and transformers are all American-made units from Classic Tone. Sturdily put together, with wires all efficiently laid-out and neatly tied together, it's a build that inspires confidence. >

Special thanks to Austin Guitar House in Texas for supplying the images in this piece. Visit them online at austinguitarhouse.com



The internal build is neat, tidy and extremely well put together using top quality components

Tested with a Gibson Custom Shop 1959 Les Paul Reissue, a Fender Telecaster, and a Novo Serus J with P-90s, the Stampede quickly proves itself a walloping little bundle of toothsome tone. I should know by now that physical size really doesn't matter in the amp stakes (other than, obviously, as regards the physical capabilities of pushing air as a factor of speaker number and size), but it's still kind of stunning to hear Overdrive Special-inspired tones coming from a relatively compact combo such as this.

Before diving into the legendary Dumble-style overdrive more fully, however, it's worth exploring the clean tones in this amp a little further. Plug in a Tele, close your eyes, and it's a sound about as close to archetypal Twin Reverb as you could expect a 1x12 combo to be: big, bold, punchy and clear, yet just pliant enough when you dig in that it's never harsh or hard. As per Wright's acknowledgement that the Stampede will do country as well, it definitely twangs aplenty, with a tight bass, meaty lower mids and a sweet sparkle in the highs. This mode also takes pedals extremely well, as you might expect, and turns everything from a Gas FX Drive Thru overdrive to a JHS Angry Charlie distortion into a succulent extension of the amp's own gain staging. The reverb is well-placed and enjoyable throughout the clean-to-early bite tones, too, and is less obtrusive than the effect can be in some amps I can think of.

It's stunning to hear Overdrive Special-inspired tones coming from a relatively compact combo

Although lower settings of the overdrive stage can still be effective at adding grit and texture for chunky rhythm or bluesy riffs, this feature does its best work for me with that knob at about two o'clock or beyond. It wants to be pushed somewhat hard to ease into that archetypal creamy, singing lead voice, and does it all extremely well once you get it there.

Like other Dumble-style overdrive channels, when they're done well, it's kind of a trip into the land of the lotus eaters: hard to come back once you get into it. Overall, just as Wright intended, it's a powerful grab 'n' go gigster, and a lot of sound packed into a combo of this size.

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TAYLOR 414CE

The Pineapple Thief guitarist **BRUCE SOORD** heads across the Atlantic for a tour. Playing solo acoustic shows means that he needs a new guitar – enter the Taylor 414ce...

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Back in September 2016, my good friend and prog musical trailblazer, Steven Wilson, dropped me an email asking if I wanted to do a solo acoustic support slot on his upcoming USA tour. As you would expect, he was playing some very large theatres so I immediately assented (without actually considering the logistics!). As some of you may know, touring the States is an expensive undertaking for us Europeans (visas and flights are not cheap), so reducing my gear to the bare essentials was paramount: basically it to be just me, my guitar, and a hire car.

Having done this format many times before, I felt confident performing a solo acoustic show, but my own acoustic had seen better days, and I wasn't certain it could survive another tour. Luckily though, Taylor agreed to loan me a guitar for the trip, which I would collect from the venue at the first show.

After a long flight and what seemed like an endless traffic jam getting out of LA, I arrived in Phoenix for my first show of the tour. This was also the first time that I was introduced to my new six-stringed companion – a Taylor 414ce. Thankfully I had my own dressing room and an hour or so to spare, so I was able to quickly familiarise myself with my new tour companion.

What struck me immediately was the quality of the build. Granted, the guitars I've been accustomed to have shown various signs of wear and tear during their years of abuse, but even so it was immediately evident that the Taylor was a cut above what I'm used to, especially in terms of craftsmanship. The neck felt incredibly smooth and the intonation was exceptional at every fret. Upon strumming the very first chord, I smiled at how rounded and warm the guitar sounded – rich at low level but also punchy when I gave it some welly. It also responded well to dynamic playing, it was never too bright and the lows and mids stayed reassuringly tight: exactly the kind of sound I was looking for. But what would it sound like plugged-in? Well, as the stage manager walked into my dressing room to gave me my one minute call, I was about to find out!

I felt all the acoustic nuances I enjoyed faithfully coming down the wire and through the huge PA

Playing acoustically in a small room is very different to standing on stage in front of a large crowd while plugged into a large PA, with only in-ear monitors for reference; it's a rather sterile listening environment in fact. But as soon as I started my set, which began with a fingerpicked part, I felt right at home. What irked me about my old acoustic was its inability to respond to my more dynamic playing when plugged in – yes it could go quiet and loud, but the tone was always one-dimensional. The Taylor however, was a very different proposition entirely, and the rich tone that I received though my earphones began to fill me with confidence on stage.

Steven's audiences are very respectful, so the subtle dynamics of my playing weren't lost in a cacophony of chatter. I felt all the acoustic nuances I enjoyed faithfully coming down the wire and through the huge PA. As my set progressed I found myself having a lot of fun with the Taylor – rocking out when I felt like it, bringing it down to a whisper when it needed it. There was no way I could find those kind of dynamics and tone with my old acoustic. And even though the 414ce is a cutaway model (which I'm not used to) it felt very light and balanced when standing (which is my default position on stage).

My run with Steven over, I've now turned my attention to touring with my full band, The Pineapple Thief. At this point, my time with the Taylor has sounded the death knell for my old acoustic (or at least its permanent retirement) and I simply have to tour with this guitar again. Now I wonder if they make an affordable Baritone model, too...

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This month we're giving one lucky *G&B* reader the opportunity to win the hottest and most advanced amp Fender has ever made – the brand new **Mustang GT 100**. Fender claims that the new Mustang GTs are the world's most advanced digital amplifiers, with upgraded amp models and effects with even more realism, plus increased signal path flexibility, more realistic response, 'setlist' support and effects spillover when changing presets.

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We've reviewed the new Mustang GT range on p80, so head there now to find out what we thought!

We've got the **Mustang GT 100** version to give away this month, with 100 watts of output power and a custom Celestion 1x12 speaker on board, it'll be everything you need for playing at home or jamming with your friends. For more information, head to **www.fender.com**. To be in with the chance of winning this supremely versatile amp, visit the link below and answer the following question.

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SOUNDTRACK OF MY LIFE

Nick Beggs

The Mute Gods and Kajagoogoo bassist tells *G&B* about his prog-heavy record collection

Bass player and Chapman Stick aficionado Nick Beggs' hugely diverse CV takes in everyone from Cliff Richard to Emma Bunton, Gary Numan to Tina Turner, and John Paul Jones to Right Said Fred. A long-time prog devotee, he's also worked with the three Steves of prog in his career – Hacket, Howe and Wilson, being part of the latter's touring and studio band since 2011's *Grace For Drowning*. Most famously perhaps, he's a founding member of nu-wave stalwarts Kajagoogoo, but his most recent endeavour is to lead prog-rock outfit The Mute Gods. The band sees him team up with keyboardist Roger King and fellow Wilson sideman Marco Minnemann on drums, and their new album, *Tardigrades Will Inherit The Earth*, is out now.

Yes
TALES FROM TOPOGRAPHIC OCEANS

"I guess I could have picked *Close To The Edge* but *Tales From Topographic Oceans* is even more 'out there'. For that reason I think I like it the best. Despite being a brilliant piece of excessive prog-rock, much maligned by the punk-rock generation, it is quite exquisite. I've listened to it hundreds of time since my teens and never tire of the journey it takes me on."

Pat Metheny Group
STILL LIFE (TALKING)

"Arguably the most experimental modern jazz guitarist of a generation, noted for his original style and sound, *Still Life (Talking)* amalgamates jazz and world music in a brilliantly realised package. It's hard for me to choose just one from his illustrious career but under duress, I chose this one. Other possible choices would have been, *Offramp*, *Secret Story* and *We Live Here*."

Bill Nelson's Red Noise
SOUND-ON-SOUND

"The visionary work of Bill Nelson has been my companion since the 70s, both during his time with Be-Bop Deluxe and also through his work with other artists. However *Red Noise* is a stand out that mixed punk with new wave to great effect. Dystopian future-shock lyrics and brittle fast tempo guitar barrages presented me with enough inspiration to start writing my own songs in 1979. Cheers Bill!"

Pink Floyd
ANIMALS

"For a band that defined a genre, this is quite an understated album and that's why I like it so much. Peppered with Roger Waters' vociferous lyrical bile it casts a scathing eye over the sociopolitical landscape and castigates it accordingly. Mary Whitehouse, back-stabbing professional climbers and the indolent proletariat all come in for an ass-kicking."

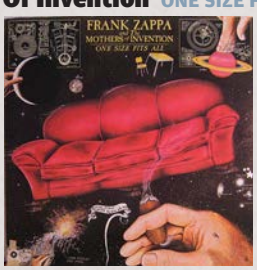
Rush
A FAREWELL TO KINGS

"What a great band. Not only a power trio of the highest order, but possibly the biggest cult band in the world. Despite their ability to sell out stadiums around the globe they remain an enigma to the mainstream. This album has all the classic characteristics of the progressive pigeonhole, but remains fresh and powerful, inventive and at times transcendental. It remains one of my favourite records."

Prefab Sprout
JORDAN: THE COMEBACK

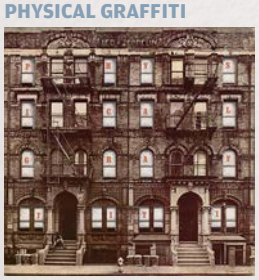
"The association of Thomas Dolby and Prefab Sprout's Paddy McAloon produced one of the finest pop albums of the 1990s. This double-set vinyl record presents the listener with an intoxicating array of highly crafted and well-produced tracks, with subject matter that stretches out from love songs and a ballads to tales about an outlaw cowboy."

Frank Zappa & The Mothers Of Invention
ONE SIZE FITS ALL



"This period of the Mothers remains my favourite. The stellar line-up saw Zappa pushing the envelope even further, with dense percussive performances by Ruth Underwood and Chester Thompson. Augmenting the studio recordings with live archive material impels the album seamlessly through many dynamism changes. Stand out tracks are *Inca Roads* and *Po-Jama People*."

Led Zeppelin
PHYSICAL GRAFFITI



"At one time the biggest band in the world, and still one of the most notorious ever, Zeppelin made so many groundbreaking albums. But there was a sweet spot apparent throughout this particular golden age of vinyl, and it was capped off by this remarkable release. The mesmeric artwork of Peter Corriston provides a captivating visual accompaniment to one of the best records ever."

Brian Eno
MUSIC FOR FILMS

"Brian Eno is a true visionary whose production skills have seen him successfully navigate four decades of an ever changing music industry. For this record he united disparate factions of musical talent and amalgamated their offerings into a benchmark. The resulting ambient soundscapes posses an outstanding beauty that's totally out of step with anything else of its time."

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Marty Stuart posing with 'Clarence' – the famous Telecaster once owned by Clarence White

Country Strong

A bluegrass veteran before he was barely out of his teens, 'Keeper Of The Flame' of true country music, Marty Stuart, is the curator of countless artefacts from Nashville's heyday and beyond including what he describes as the "greatest Telecaster in the world"...

Story **Ed Mitchell** Photography **Eleanor Jane**

In a recent interview with our sister title, *Country Music* magazine, Nashville veteran Marty Stuart signed off with this epic paragraph: "I've done everything I set out to do. I have the girl of my dreams in my life. I've got some really cool-looking cowboy boots and the greatest Telecaster in the world. I've got a Cadillac that's paid for and is really old, and 150 bucks in my pocket to put gas in it."

The "girl of his dreams" is country icon Connie Smith, the woman Stuart fell in love with when he was just 12 years old, and later married. It was a personal high in a life that professionally saw him join country guitarist and mandolinist [and banjo icon Earl Scruggs compadre] Lester Flatt's band at the age of 14, and later become Johnny Cash's right hand man, co-composing The Man In Black's final song *Hangman*. Most recently, Stuart has been celebrating the release of his new concept album *Way Out West*, made flesh with his band the Fabulous Superlatives, and produced by Tom Petty & The Heartbreakers guitarist Mike Campbell.

And, what of that "greatest Telecaster in the world" claim? Marty Stuart has long been known as 'The Keeper of The Flame' of real country music. An archivist and collector of country music relics, he took possession of late Kentucky Colonels and Byrds guitarist Clarence White's heavily-modified 50s Telecaster in the early 80s. Built in collaboration with fellow Byrd Gene Parsons, the Tele is the first ever 'pull-string' or B-Bender guitar.

An exceptional bluegrass flat-picker turned Tele master, Clarence's guitar had fallen silent after the guitarist's death on 14 July 1973, when he was struck by a drunk driver while loading gear into his car at 2am in Palmdale, California. Marty Stuart takes up the story...

"Clarence's wife Susie had moved back to her home state of Kentucky, maybe seven years after Clarence died," he recalls. "I had just gone to work with Johnny Cash and Susie would come down to Nashville with her children on the weekends sometimes and spend time with Clarence's brother, Roland. They were always like family, you >

Above top The Tele has been used heavily by Marty since he bought it in the 80s

Above right The guitar is aesthetically the same as it was when White owned it

Middle left The guitar has a pair of Scruggs banjo tuners that White added – Marty moved one of them up from the A to bottom E string

Middle right The guitar's standout feature is the prototype 'pull string', or B-bender, which was the first of its kind on any guitar

know. Roland was the guy that got me my job with Lester Flatt. We're still family to those people.

"So somewhere along the way, in the early part of the 1980s, Susie called me one night and said 'I need to sell a few things. I wondered if you'd be interested?'

"I drove up to her home in Kentucky and she wanted to sell a 1954 Stratocaster that they had used as a parts guitar for Clarence's pull-string, and she wanted to sell some Nudie suits and some Byrds paraphernalia that had belonged to Clarence. I said, 'Sure, I'm happy to buy it'."

While Stuart was interested in the '54 Strat and the Byrds stuff, he had another Clarence White artefact on his mind...

"I said, 'Is the pull-string here?' She said, 'That's what you really want to see...' and I said 'Yep!' She opened the case and there was like a string missing off it and I said 'Oh man, look at that. There it is!' I started playing it and just poking around. I didn't have a clue what to feel other than it was like holding the 'Grail' of Telecaster guitars. You could put a thousand Telecasters in a row, I could close my eyes and tell you which one was 'Clarence'. I'd dreamed about just touching it for so long.

"Susie said, 'That's the guitar you really want, isn't it?' And I said, 'Are you kidding!?' I laid my chequebook on the table and said 'Within reason, fill in any number you want to... and if I don't have the money, my mom works at a bank!'"

After some deliberation, White came back with a price for him. "She said, 'I want $1,450.'" White recalls "I said, 'Susie, the E string on Clarence's guitar is worth more than that.' 'I know what it's worth,' she replied. 'I want you to have it. Clarence would've wanted you to have it. I know you'll take care of it, and do the right thing with it'.

"So, that's how much she charged me and she hand wrote out a receipt... and from the beginning I felt a responsibility towards that guitar."

As it turned out, "Doing the right thing" has seen the Telecaster in constant service since – in the studio and on the road.

Stuart continues: "When I first got the guitar, the first time that I used it publicly was on a show called *Saturday Night Live*, playing behind Johnny Cash. I went down the street to a store in New York City called Manny's, and bought a gigbag for it. Then I went to American Airlines and bought an Advantage number for it. I treated it with kid gloves. It flew in its own seat on planes and had Advantage miles. It's been pampered since day one."

Clarence isn't like any other Telecaster. For a start, the body is twice as thick as Leo Fender designed it [Stuart: "Is it heavy? About like a banjo. It's not too bad."]; the additional body depth covers the prototype B-Bender

"I have the girl of my dreams. I've got some really cool-looking cowboy boots and the greatest Telecaster in the world"

mechanism. In other news, the neck pickup has been replaced by a Strat unit with a white cover – likely from that '54 – and at some point the bridge single coil was rewound by steel guitarist Red Rhodes, whose 'Velvet Hammer' pickups were popular with other country players including James Burton.

"I think the body is a '54," says Stuart. "Clarence had another neck made for it at Fender, in the late 60s or early 70s. It's more of a V shape. We keep dressing the original frets. Although I think I may have had to replace one. I think it's getting pretty close to needing some new frets."

The truth of whether the guitar was originally a Telecaster or Esquire has been forever buried by the sands of time but Clarence is so heavily-modified that it's of little importance now. Stuart's determination to keep the guitar in service led to some modifications of his own. The first of these concerned the Scruggs banjo tuners that allow quick adjustment for alternate tunings.

"Clarence had the Scruggs peg on the high E string and on the A string, and he would tune it down, a bit like an open G tuning that he would play on [Byrds] songs like *Nashville West*. I moved the second Scruggs peg up to the bass string because I just don't do much in Open G.

"The only other thing that I did to that guitar... there's a little pedal, a palm pedal that lowers the E string down a half step. Ralph Mooney, the steel guitar player, he's the one that did that. I wouldn't have trusted anyone else..."

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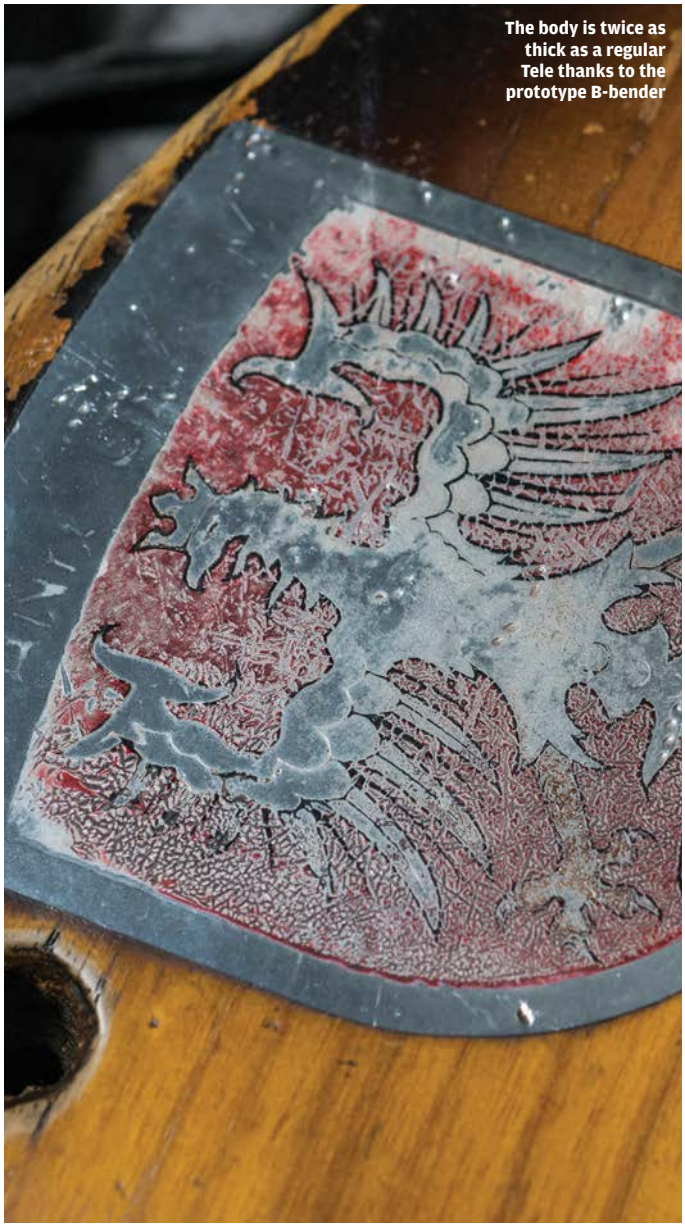

The body is twice as thick as a regular Tele thanks to the prototype B-bender

Oh, and there's just one more thing... "On the back of the guitar, if you change strings or you broke a string, you had to take seven or eight screws out and take the whole back of the guitar off. I routed out a little hole on the back of the guitar so that I could run the strings through the body. Other than that, it's the same dirt on the guitar, the same decals, everything. I left it alone."

Clarence is all over Marty Stuart & His Fabulous Superlatives' new record *Way Out West*. Cut at Mike Campbell's studio in California, the album is an eclectic celebration of Stuart's love of the American West and its unique flavours of Bakersfield country and country rock. Marty's biggest connection to the West Coast scene is of course Clarence...

"The guitar was one of the stars, and the central theme of that record," says Stuart. "There's a song on there called *A Million Miles To Go*. What was really interesting, I was in Nashville, and I needed to do a little touch up on the guitar solo. Clarence's daughter Michelle came by the studio the day we happened to be working on that song. I kept telling myself 'man, you have to let Clarence White rip through this solo.' There's a record called *Byrdmaniax* [1971] and on the album cover there was four masks of The Byrds [Roger McGuinn, Skip Battin, Gene Parsons, and Clarence].

"Michelle has Clarence's mask from that album cover. It's in a frame. Well, she brought that mask to the studio with her that day. I set it on the floor at my feet. When I was playing that solo from *A Million Miles From Home*, Clarence was looking up at me. I was like, 'Oh man, this is too good'. It inspired me.

"When I first got that guitar, I understood there was a lot of people our there going 'Why him? Why did he get it? He's not worthy of that guitar'. I agreed with them – 100 per cent. Clarence's shadow looms large. I felt unworthy to have that guitar, for a long time.

"Then I wrote this song called *Hummingbyrd* [from Stuart's essential 2010 album, *Ghost Train: The Studio B Sessions*]. I wrote it for Clarence. When that song won a Grammy, I felt like I'd earned my stripes with that guitar... finally. It took a long time for me to feel that way."

> "The first time that I used 'Clarence' publicly was on a show called *Saturday Night Live*, playing behind Johnny Cash"

Marty Stuart & His Fabulous Superlatives' *Way Out West* is out now on Wrasse Records. More details at www.martystuart.net

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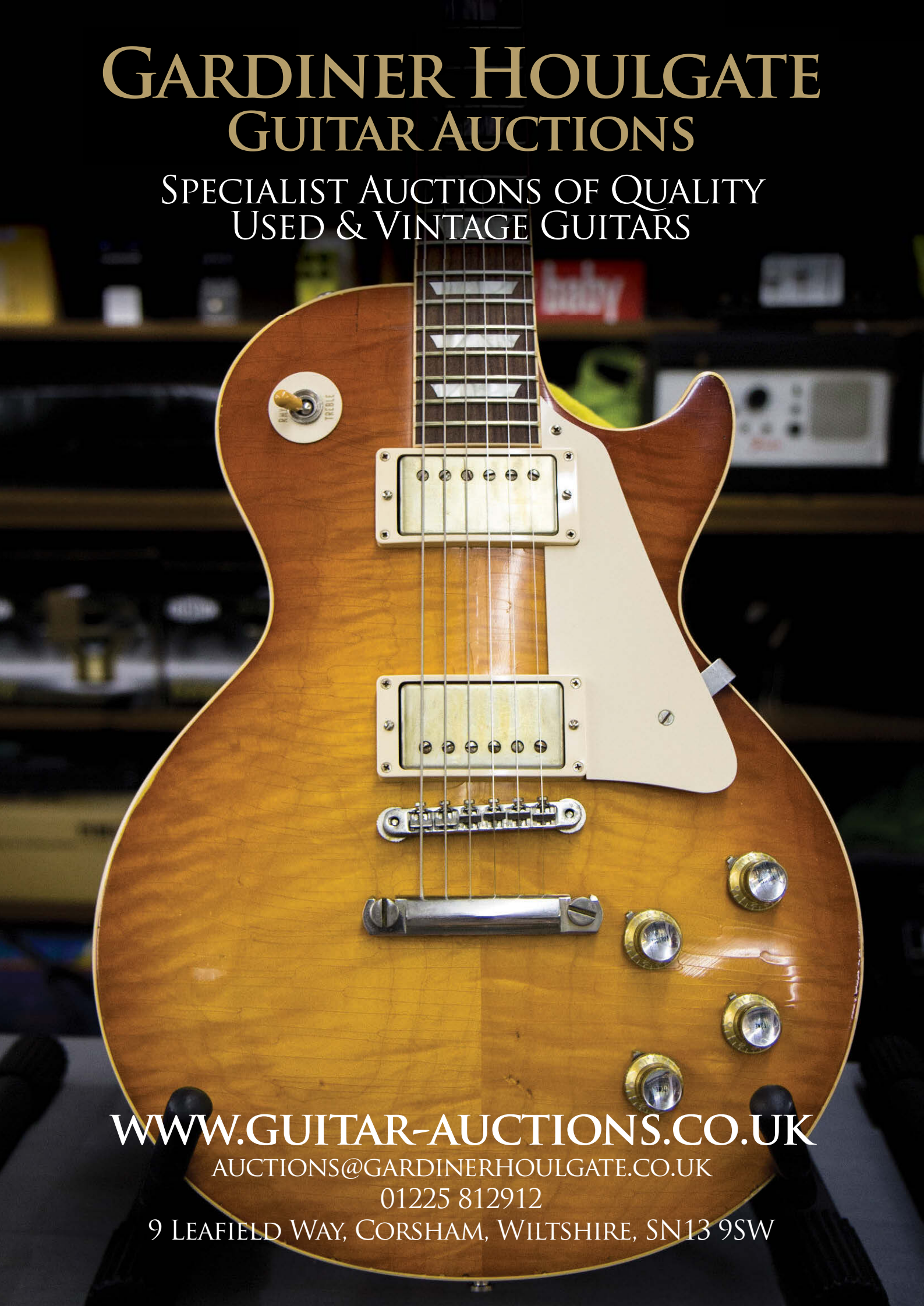

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THE Guitar & Bass INTERVIEW

"They wouldn't discover that I couldn't read music until we were in the middle of the Atlantic"

From Django to Tony Bennett via Chet Atkins, the jazz guitar virtuoso tells us how he started out on the road to being a musician: from being dropped in at the deep end, to blagging it in the middle of the ocean...

Story **David Gallant**

Martin Taylor's obsession with gypsy jazz guitar started at a very early age. In fact, to hear the British jazz institution tell it, his interest began before he was even born: "My dad was a big Django Reinhardt fan, so I was listening to the Hot Club de France when I was still in my mother's womb!" Taylor exclaims. "Then, when I was four years old, I picked up my dad's guitar and started to play it. Apparently I made very quick progress, so my father decided to buy himself a double bass and let me be the guitarist in the family."

If that sounds like the prefect start for any budding musician to have, things didn't go totally smoothly for Taylor at the start.

"My first guitar was a Russian classical-style instrument that my father bought at Pettycoat Lane market for a pound," he recalls. "It was almost impossible to play, and should have put me off guitar playing for life! My second was made by a friend of my dad's out of some old pieces of wood and some salvaged bits of various guitars. He tried to make it look like a Strat... but it ended up like a cross between a small canoe and a chair leg! It was almost unplayable. But worse than that, it made my fingers bleed! Then my father bought me a Framus electric from our local music shop. I played that for a while, but noticed that the action started getting higher and higher until one day I picked it up, played a chord, and the guitar exploded! The neck came away from the body with an almighty crash and I was left holding bits of broken wood!"

Martin plays Peerless signature models, but also more boutique offerings, such as this Vanden Artistry Caprice

Jazz Club

The youngest of three children, Taylor's early musical influences unsurprisingly came from what he heard at home. "As a little kid I spent a lot of time at home on my own with my mum," he explains. "She had a great love of music that also influenced me a lot. She used to play all these Sinatra, Nat King Cole and Tony Bennett records. I remember that at the time thinking, 'You're playing that soppy music again!' But I became fascinated by it and grew to love that music, and it's one of the things that I listen to a lot now. I learned a lot from singers, but what really struck me was listening to the orchestras. I was fascinated by the combination of sounds."

By the time he came to buy his own records, however, his father's jazzy influence had started to take hold. "My dad told me about Wes Montgomery when I was about 11 or 12, and I think I saw Barney Kessel on TV," Taylor remembers. "I really liked what I heard and I'd not heard anything like that before. To me, up to that moment in time Django was *the* jazz guitar player. So I went up to our local newsagent that had a small record department and asked whether they had any records by Wes Montgomery. And they said: 'We can order them'." They had a list of these records and I just saw one and I picked it out. It was called *California Dreamin'*. It was one of his with strings, but I didn't know that."

> "My dad was a big Django Reinhardt fan, so I was listening to the Hot Club de France when I was still in my mother's womb!"

In those days, however, ordering a new album was an endurance event. "Every week I used to go up there to see if it had come in and I think it took about six or seven weeks," Taylor explains. "Eventually I went home with this double album – one of the more 'commercial' Creed Taylor-produced albums. But I really liked it, because there was a lot of strings on it and a lot of orchestral things going on. It was the first time I'd heard octave playing. There were just a few times when he broke out and played some single-string lines, but even though there weren't very many of them, it was enough. That's all I needed. Just to hear that. A lot of jazz aficionados said: 'Oh, you don't want to get that record, it's just commercial rubbish'. And I said, 'Well I think it's really great. And anyway, I'm a complete sucker for strings'. Then other people who were hip to that said, 'You've got to listen to *Smokin' At The Half Note*'. The famous trio [Miles Davis's Wynton Kelley Trio rhythm section]. And the two combined did it for me."

Slow & Low

Listening to Montgomery and his band play was a revelation for Taylor, and he was soon sitting down with his guitar and attempting to learn the guitar lines for himself. "Our record player used to be able to run a 33 at half-speed – around 16," he recalls. "I soon discovered that if you play an LP at 16, you play everything an octave lower and slower, and by doing that, you could pick tunes up. It was perfect for me as I couldn't read music, so everything was done by ear."

It wasn't just Wes that captured a young Martin's imagination however, and it wasn't long before he was looking to incorporate the styles of other instruments into his guitar repertoire. "My dad also used to play a lot of Fats Waller and Art Tatum, and I became quite fascinated by that," he says. "I thought, 'Wouldn't it be nice to play like that on the guitar?' And of course I didn't know that it was possible at the time – and I wouldn't until I heard classical guitar players and then Chet Atkins and Merle Travis. Travis would be playing things such as a walking bass line while he was playing some chords and

melody. However, I knew that I didn't want to play classical guitar and I didn't want to go country pickin'. It's not that I didn't like all of that, but I came from a jazz background and I wanted to be able to improvise. So that was a big revelation for me, that it was actually technically possible to do these things. I had all these ideas in my mind about being able to play the guitar and having the same kind of effect as a piano player would have with the left hand and the right hand. The problem was that when I went to play, I realised that I couldn't play the guitar well enough. My musicality was way beyond my ability!"

Stepping Out

For many of us, that first gig can be a moment of serious trepidation, but for Martin, there was an added pressure. "Talk about being thrown in at the deep end!" Martin chuckles. "One Saturday night when I was 11, my dad had gone out to do a gig with his dance band and then about half an hour later he came back and said to my mum: 'Get out a bow tie and Martin's going to put a suit on. The guitar player hasn't shown up.' So I went to do the gig. The guitar player came back for a little while, but then eventually decided to pack it in. The guys from the band said: 'why don't you get your boy to do it?' By this time I was just coming up to 12. So I started doing gigs with my dad and this was when I bought my first real guitar – a Guild Starfire Deluxe from Ivor Mairants for 90 guineas."

Despite the hair-raising intro, Martin had caught the bug, and it was soon taking precedence over everything else, even his education. "I didn't go to school very often!" he exclaims. "At school I didn't tell anyone that I played the guitar. I remember once at music class I asked if I could bring my guitar and they said no. They said it wasn't a proper instrument. So I left when I was 15, 'cos I was already playing three or four gigs a week with the Lenny Hastings band. Then I went up to Morecambe to do a summer season, and by the time I was 17 I was playing in the Harry Bence band on the QE2 – I was the youngest musician ever to play on a Cunard liner."

Fish Stories

Taylor's rise to a cruise ship maestro was rapid, but it was one that was couched in a few tall tales, and a fair bit of brass neck on the part of the young guitarist. "When I joined the band on the QE2 they asked me if I could read music and I told a bit of a lie and said yes," he remembers. "I realised that they wouldn't discover that I couldn't read until we were in the middle of the Atlantic, and I was sure that they weren't going to send me back! After a couple of days Harry [Bence] said, 'You can't read music very well, can you?' So I said, 'Well actually I can't read music at all, I'm just busking it'. So he gave me some clarinet books with tablature – I learned on the gig." >

It was a gig that would expand Taylor's horizons in a variety of ways. "We went to New York and I was based in that part of the world for two years," he adds. "I used to go to the Village Vanguard to listen to all those fabulous jazz musicians and I also picked up a nice Gibson ES-175 from one of the guitar stores on 48th street."

Taylor came back to UK shores when he was around 19 and he remembers playing an opening set at Oxford St's famous 100 Club upon his return. "It was the first time I'd played the club and as luck would have it, the great jazz guitarist Ike Isaacs was there and Ike invited me round to his house," he remembers. "I learnt so much from Ike, he was really my guitar mentor. I had this idea in my head about playing solo, so he helped me a lot with that. He was a fantastic solo player and turned me on to Lenny Breau – one of the greatest guitar players ever. He really reinforced my belief that it was possible to achieve what I had going on in my head. Then I met Peter Boizot, who was the founder of Pizza Express. Peter was a big jazz fan and when he opened his first pizza place in London's Wardour Street he made a point of always having jams on there. Then he opened one called Pizza on the Park and he said, 'I'm thinking of having music in there on a Thursday night – a duo', and he said. I saw Ike later that day and told him about it and he said 'Yes I'd love to – but we need to rehearse. We can't just busk'. So I used to go round to his house a couple of times a week and we'd come up with arrangements. I never had lessons with Ike, but I learnt so much from him because we were rehearsing together – and these were lessons in themselves."

These 'lessons' would be a turning point Martin's developing guitar style. "Ike got such a beautiful semi-acoustic kind of sound, and I kind of followed that tradition." Taylor continues. "I play fingerstyle, so there's a lot of definition and separation between all the notes. If I had a sound that was too electric, all the notes kind of merge. I think you need something that's going to ring out a little bit more. That's where my sound is different from most jazz guitar players. At first jazz critics thought that this was just a technical thing, but that couldn't be further from the truth. The whole thing was led by the music. Unfortunately I just had rather complicated ideas. I learned by stripping everything down. I describe the way I play solo as a bit of a souffle – there's a lot of space in the middle! It sounds a lot bigger than it really is."

Box Of Tricks

While Martin's first guitars were wounding – both physically and mentally – these days his choice is much more befitting for a man of his talents. "I'm playing Peerless Guitars made in Busan, South Korea," he says of his signature squeezes. "I designed two models that Peerless manufacture for me, the Maestro and the Virtuoso. I designed them so that they have a greater dynamic range than most archtop guitars – a strong bass and more sparkling high frequencies, in contrast to most archtops, which have a lot of mids."

With a 50-year career in music behind him, it's no surprise that Taylor has owned some droolsome guitars. "I've had a 1935 Selmer Maccaferri 'Grande Bouche', a 1936 D'Angelico Deluxe, a 1929 Martin 000-45, and quite a few other vintage instruments," he confirms. "I have about 20 guitars at the moment. Some are my working guitars, some are investments, and some have sentimental value, like my dad's 1958 Hofner President."

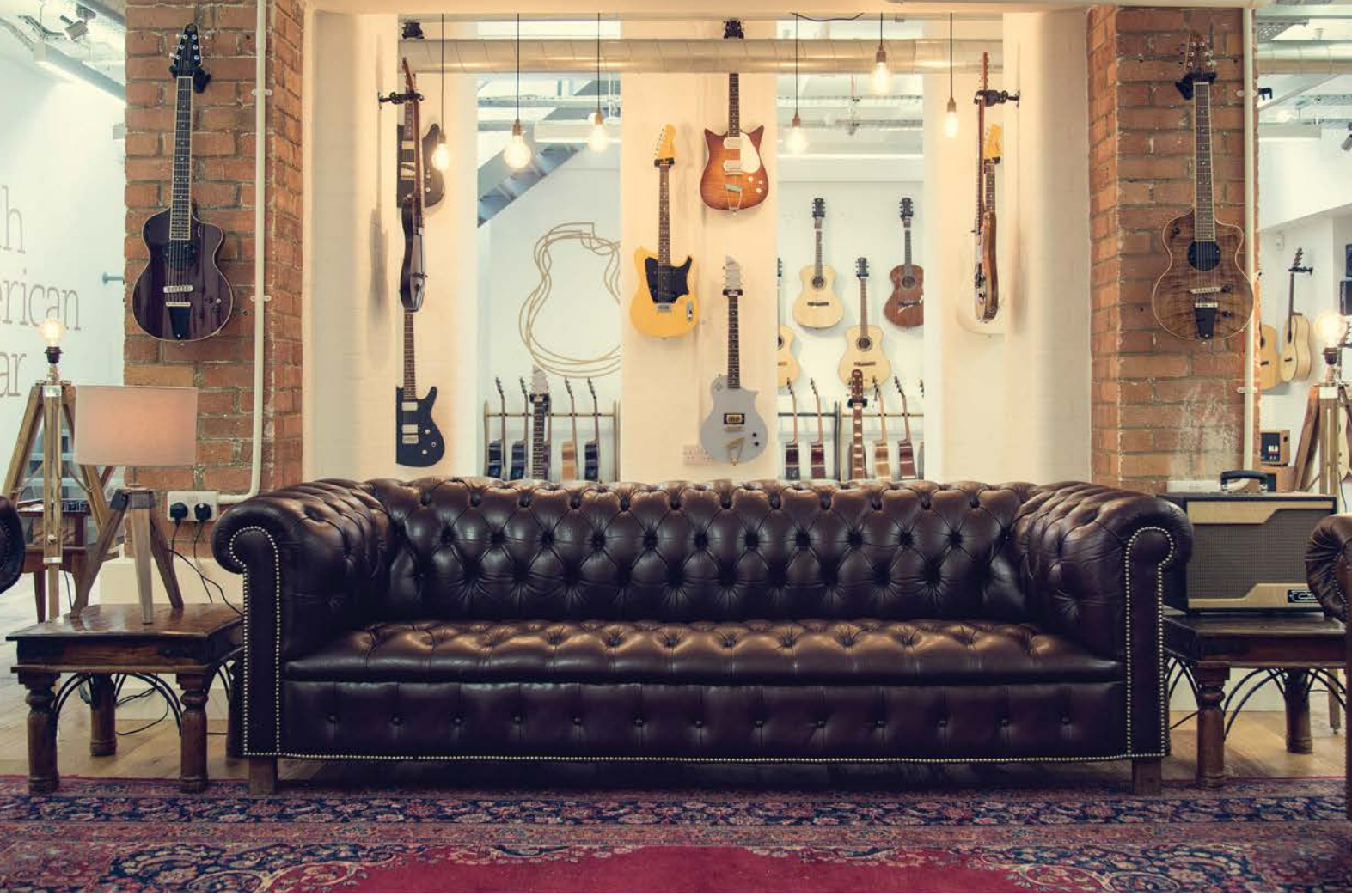
"I describe the way I play solo as a bit of a souffle – there's a lot of space in the middle! It sounds a lot bigger than it really is"

Django Unchained

It's not just his father's guitar that Taylor holds dear – those early records that he'd hear him play remain touchstones, and none more so than Django Reinhardt. "I always remember that the first thing that struck me, and was really different from the other musicians that I heard, was the directness of his playing," he enthuses. "It was as if his playing was talking directly to me and of course, as I grew up I realised what that was about. He was just a master of melodic improvisation – the most difficult form of improvisation. To improvise something on the spot and make it as good or maybe even better than the original melody. And taking it in different directions – it's story telling."

"I work a lot in America now and there has been a resurgence in what they now call 'Gypsy jazz' And there are a lot of great players, but a lot of them seem to miss the point of just how melodic Django was," he observes as our conversation winds up. "Not all of them, but for the majority of them it's all about whizzing around, very fast. But if you actually listen to Django, he didn't do that. When you go back to listen to a lot of the tracks, one of the things that is often very striking is just how slow the tempos were. He never played anything that was really fast. He played fast flurrys, but always in a very melodic way. They always fitted into the melody. The music came first."

Taylor started out learning Wes Montgomery records at half speed



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Tim Sult's ESSENTIAL FESTIVAL SURVIVAL TIPS

Whether you're playing on the back of a lorry in front of a hundred people at the back of a pub or closing Glastonbury, playing a festival stage presents a unique set of challenges. Clutch guitarist Tim Sult teaches **THEA DE GALLIER** some of the hard-won lessons the band have learned over two decades of live graft...

Clutch know all about the relentless pressure of touring. They've spent much of their 25-year career on the road in support of their 11 albums, as well as finding the time for numerous side projects. Their latest full-length, 2015's *Psychic Warfare*, is a sci-fi concept album inspired by the writing of Philip K Dick. They're currently in the early stages of working on album 12, and as ever, Tim Sult's raw, bluesy riffs are at the heart of things.

Clutch are something of a rarity in the world of long-serving rock bands, in that the line-up has remained the same throughout their career. And while this means they've had a quarter of a century to hone their chemistry live, it doesn't mean that shows are approached with a devil-may-care attitude. We sat down with Tim to talk about how to prepare for a festival slot, he told us that mistakes are par for the course, crowds are unpredictable and gear stuffs up, even after 25 years. Such is the life of a guitarist... >

1 Don't go in undercooked – practice makes perfect...

"In the weeks before any tour, I try to warm up as much as I can and refresh myself on our songs because I tend to forget how to play our songs after about three weeks of being home! When I'm at home, I try to play as much guitar as humanly possible. As a band, Clutch are always trying to work on new material and trying to move forwards, so the more I play guitar, the better. I live about 45 minutes west of where we practise, and Neil [Fallon, Clutch frontman and guitarist] lives about 45 minutes south of where we practise so we have a nice little central location where we have a studio, a warehouse where we keep everything in Frederick, Maryland."

2 Don't forget that you're there to work, not play...

"For me, the trick is to not drink before the show. That's something I figured out probably 15 or 20 years ago. I think it takes getting too drunk and playing hundreds of bad shows to realise that! Also, the last time we played Download, we played at the same time as ZZ Top. We would stop playing and we could hear ZZ Top playing from across the field – it was kind of a bummer all around as we'd been really excited to see them!"

3 The weather will be a factor...

"We've played really, really cold festivals where I've had to wear two jackets on stage. I've worn thermals on stage this year, but it varies – it was 100 degrees recently in France. For hot shows, you need sun block. For rainy shows, I like to have an extra pair of shoes because I've ruined so many pairs of shoes at festivals and had to go out in places like Sweden and pay $400 for a pair of shoes that would cost $100 in the US!"

4 Festival crowds can be different to audiences you're used to...

"Playing festivals really varies every night. When we're playing to a crowd that doesn't really seem like they're reacting to it too much, I always feel like they're just listening to it and getting into the band for the first time. When I was younger, I used to think that unless there was a super crazy pit, that the crowd wasn't into it, but now that I'm old, I like to sit on a chair when I go to a concert and watch a band and I'm just as into it as a young kid trying to kick people in the face. I realise you don't have to be going crazy at a show to actually enjoy it. I only take it personally if someone throws like a Kit-Kat at me or something!"

"I used to think that unless there was a super crazy pit, that the crowd wasn't into it, but now that I'm old, I like to sit on a chair when I go to a concert"

Tim has been a Gibson devotee for years, but has recently added PRS guitars into the mix

5 Get your body right before you play... or at least try to

"Quite honestly, I feel like my diet is better when I'm on tour. When I'm at home, I have two young kids who love to eat fries and terrible food. I'm a terrible dad so I end up taking my kids through a lot of drive-thrus, but when I'm on tour, I eat so much better. It's weird. Having said that, I have been trying to work out a little bit at home. I know it doesn't really show but it takes me a lot of working out just to make my body look semi-human, so that's where I'm at right now."

6 Some things are going to be out of your control...

"Most bands we play with run a pretty tight ship. Some other bands aren't as professional as we are, or don't have as much experience, and they play a little bit over. Really, the only disasters that we have a lot of times are with rental gear. A lot of times rental gear is really hit or miss and we don't have a sound check, so when we get up on stage, if we have rental gear it's kinda weird. But over the past few years, we've had a storage space here in the UK so we have our own gear stored here. We can tour Europe now with our own gear and that makes everything go so much better."

If your pedalboard packs up, you just have to make the best of it

7 And disasters will happen...

"At Reading this year, my pedalboard wasn't powering up like it should. My delay pedal didn't work so that was a bummer and I was having a hard time reading my tuner because the lights were dim. I was supposed to be in drop D and I'd accidentally tuned my D string to D#. It was kind of a disaster for 30 seconds. At every show, chances are things are going to go really wrong. When you're dealing with tube amplifiers and stringed instruments, you're really just playing with fire, because you're using technology from about 8AD combined with tube technology from the 40s."

8 Try to use gear that you're comfortable with...

"I've been playing Orange OR100s and the Mk 3 Rockerverb 100s since May last year. I've just moved over to PRS guitars. I went to a music store to find a guitar that wasn't a Gibson because I'd bought way too many Gibsons in my life. I settled on a PRS Custom 24 and I love it. They've also hooked me up with an SC245, and I'm actually getting a guitar made by them as well. It's kind of a cross between a Tremonti and an SC245."

9 But this isn't the time to be precious about your tone...

"Oh my God, I've played at least 20 or 30 shows where I've hated my amps. A lot of times, I'll get a [rental] amp and it just sounds absolutely nothing like my amp of the exact same model. You have to carry on. You carry on and feel bad about yourself afterwards!"

10 Try to check out other bands on the bill if you can...

"It usually depends on the convenience of the whole thing – how far away the next stage is and what time we're playing – but I try to watch as many bands as possible. A a lot of times I'm too tired or warming up to actually go out and watch the show though."

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The Hits Parade

The explosion of social media allows musicians to build a fanbase without the need for labels, marketing... even playing gigs. Roberto Restuccia is one of a new breed of young guitar players who are using the internet to make a name for themselves...

Story **Bob Hewitt** Photography **Marco Restuccia and Tim Bastock**

In the last decade or so, the measure of what constitutes a hit record has shifted from how many thousands of physical records you sell, onto how many downloads you get or even to the number of Spotify or YouTube streams you get. While the measure of your popularity has as much to do with how many Facebook likes you have as how many tickets you can sell. Wiltshire guitarist Roberto Restuccia has embraced this sea change in the music industry, side-stepping conventional rock 'n' roll wisdom and the fetishisation of vintage gear in favour of a more tech-savvy approach.

After he left the Academy of Contemporary Music, rather than joining a gigging band and chasing a record deal, he decided to use the internet as his 'stage' and set about reaching a global audience. A busy music teacher – both physically and online – Roberto has a huge following thanks to his extraordinary guitar playing talent and liquid-like tone.

One of his recent videos for an online backing track hub, Coffee Break Grooves, garnered more than 300,000 views in two weeks, gear companies want him to demo their wares online, and he has released an album, *Exposure*, to critical acclaim. With his second full-length, *When The Smoke Clears*, in the can, *G&B* caught up with Roberto at his Swindon studio to find out how he ripped up the guitar rulebook in his quest to make it as a musician.

Q How did you get started with guitar?

"Well, we didn't have any musicians or musical influences in my family – which is unusual for Italians – so it all came from being at school. I was about 12 listening to Slash, and it was like 'Whoah – this is what I like!' I found an old guitar in the attic, but it only had one string. That got me started – until I exhausted that one string, and begged my parents to buy me a proper guitar. When I got my first six-string, I didn't have any lessons at first – I just emulated what I saw by recording concerts onto VHS tapes. I was fascinated and inspired by the guitar – and determined to learn. I bought a Guns N' Roses songbook, but found it hard as I didn't understand the music notes – although I did pick up a few riffs here and there!"

Q Was that first guitar an electric, then?

"No, it was a little Hohner acoustic. We were passing a music store, and I think my parents realised that one string wasn't enough anymore! [laughs] So my dad paid £50 for this guitar, and I was over the moon. I mean, I couldn't even tune it – but it had six strings and the neck wasn't warped, so I was pretty happy! Every lunchtime I would practise with all the other kids in school. We listened to Guns N' Roses – and I was really into Nuno Bettencourt at that time, too. Someone would be playing drums and a bit of bass, but most of them were guitar guys who were having lessons... and I wasn't! But I was hanging with them and picking up as much as I could."

Q You've obviously come a long way as a guitar player since then – how did you develop your technique initially?

"I would watch the Guns N' Roses and Pearl Jam concerts that I'd recorded and listen to lots of CDs, too. I've had to throw away so many worn out players! On one of them, the rewind button actually fell into the machine because of over-use, trying to nail licks by playing the discs over and over again!" >

Roberto's chops have earned him a global online following

Q When did you decide you wanted to be a musician?
"I was studying fine art, but when I was about 16, things took a turn. I saw an advert in a guitar magazine for ACM in Guildford, and decided there and then – this is what I wanted to do. I had an interview and was accepted. I had some amazing teachers, and I was able to spend every day with Guthrie Govan and Pete Callard – I was very lucky, and they were influential in every way."

Q The learning curve must have been pretty steep with tutors like that...
"You'd go home to study and practice – then the next day, you're playing it in front of the college I remember the first time it happened it was a shock 'So you want me to do this... have I got, like, a week?' No – you've got an evening. [laughs] It was great experience – there were a few 'argh' moments, but it was a brilliant education. Their philosophy was 'If you want to be a musician, get your butt up there and play' – and it worked!"

Q Did you do the degree course at ACM?
"No, I did a one-year course... but I had no formal education in music whatsoever. I didn't even know the names of major and minor chords! I knew how to play stuff, and had some fretboard dexterity, and I could play in time or whatever. But I didn't have a clue about harmony and theory – and I didn't think I needed it. Obviously, going to the Academy helped me with that side of things. I decided not to do the degree, and left after a year to go straight into teaching. I was 19 – and I've been teaching ever since."

Q Did you not fancy joining a band?
"I did various things with people locally, but it's difficult. You'd spend a year rehearsing, and then it wouldn't take off or be going anywhere – the same old story. To be honest, I was quite happy teaching. I've only been focusing on my own music for two or three years – I wasn't doing any band stuff, and I wanted to push out into a different area. I felt like the computer was the best way for me to express myself, and get something out there, that people could see immediately."

> "I wanted to push out into a different area. I felt like the computer was the best way for me to express myself, and get something out there, that people could see immediately"

Q Clearly that paid off when you started working with Coffee Break Grooves...
"The owner of CBG saw my videos and liked my playing. He started sending me tracks so I could play over them. It was fun, I was enjoying it – and people were seeing me play. One of the latest videos has racked up 314,000 views in just a couple of weeks!"

Q And you've done some demo work, too...
"Yeah, I've done the Roland Blues Cube, and I've had various companies send me guitars and amplifiers to play – and this has all come from the internet interest."

Q Are you still teaching, too?
"Yes I am. I'm also doing a lot via Coffee Break Grooves with tuition packages – they're packages with tablature and explanations regarding what I'm doing, and where it's coming from scale-wise. It's very new – and very successful already."

Q Are you still not tempted to join a band now you've made a name for yourself?
"People are starting to know my name more now, which is great. I do get calls to do one-off gigs here and there. I'm working with some great musicians, but the time aspect doesn't leave much space for gigs."

Q So with such a hectic schedule, what led you to make your first album, *Exposure*?
"It was more for my own satisfaction. I didn't set out to make a 'hit'. I just had these little >

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Roberto is no gear snob, but he's got quality guitar tools to do his job

"I love George Benson's style of playing – plus Robben Ford and Larry Carlton are awesome. I also love Prince for his musicianship... but Slash for the hair!"

ideas floating around, and did it all by myself on the smallest budget you can imagine – just to test the water. I knew I had a good following on social media, and people were complementing my tone and melodies. I've got limited equipment here, so I didn't go after the best amplifiers or whatever – it just is what it is. Even the programs and the drums I used – and I know this sounds weird – but I wanted to make them sound as fake as possible. I didn't want to disguise or hide the fact I was using them. The emphasis is on my guitar playing, because the musical idea far outweighs the gear that you use. It's given me a nice platform and created new contacts for my latest album. *Exposure* was getting a lot of airplay on indie radio, and it reached further afield than I ever expected. In America, things started to snowball when one DJ tipped off another DJ and so on."

Q How are you approaching your second album differently to the first?

"Artificial beats work really well sometimes, but I'm also using real musicians this time like Roger Inniss on bass. He'll be playing on all my tracks, along with some American musicians. It's called *When The Smoke Clears* – there's some blues stuff, and although I don't consider myself a 'jazz player', there's certain jazziness to some tracks, too."

Q You mentioned Slash as an early influence – who else informed your playing style?

"I love that George Benson style of playing – plus Robben Ford and Larry Carlton are awesome, I really look up to them both. I also love Prince for his musicianship... but Slash for the hair! [laughs] Acid-jazz guitarist Ronnie Jordan was another a big influence on me – because of that mix, where contemporary meets jazz. More recently, Chuck Loeb – his sense of melody is amazing and very catchy. One of the things I like to do with my music... it has to be catchy. I'm always looking for a swinging kind of groove. If you'd asked me when I was 18 or 19, it would be 'how many sweeping arpeggios can I squeeze into this piece'. Now, it's about my playing serving the song. That comes from Robben Ford – listening to his music taught me not to go crazy on the fretboard – but concentrate on tone, phrase and your ear."

Q Your rig seems pretty stripped down...

"Yeah, it's pretty simple really, because most of the amps that I use are sent to me to demo – so I don't actually own them, I have to give them back! For the album, I don't use any amps at all, I use a [Avid] Eleven Rack. I use that for pretty much everything, because it's not convenient to mic up amplifiers for home projects – and it's not consistent."

Q You don't seem to be a gear snob...

"I don't want to be like, 'Oh – I must use this because it's vintage' or the latest expensive thing. That said, I do own a Dr Z Maz 18, which I take out for live work. It's a great amplifier – just like Buddy Whittington uses. For the album and general use, I have my PRS Hollowbody II, which is great because I can blend the piezo acoustic type sound with the electric – especially as I use 0.011-gauge strings with a wound G. Then I've also got a Gibson Custom Shop Class 5 Les Paul and a Fender Custom Shop Strat. I've discovered that for a Strat to come alive, you need to use heavier strings and crank up the action to make it sing. You get a certain kind of 'chewiness' when you set them up just right."

Q So what's the next step for you?

"I'd like to try and break into the bigger leagues, but I'm just going to produce music that I like – and try to stay true to myself. I'd like to start touring... somehow. I know that there is a market for instrumental music – especially in the USA. But to keep producing good music – and making a living, that's the ultimate."

For more information on Roberto's music, check out: www.robertorestuccia.com

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DIY WORKSHOP

GOLDTOP CONVERSION WORKSHOP

PART ONE

Do you wish your guitar had that classic Goldtop look? In a new multi-part guide, **HUW PRICE** shows you how to turn your tired old single-cut into a '54-style golden wonder with soapbar P-90s and a wrapover bridge ...

1 We're using a 1989 Greco LP-style with humbuckers as the donor guitar for this project

2 Greco guitars from this era sport a logo with opening at the top of the letter 'O'

3 The serial number confirms this is a 1989 model so we're certainly dealing with some old wood here

By now you've probably recognised a theme that's common to many of *G&B*'s Workshop projects – if you can't afford to buy a guitar that you want, then build something similar yourself! So, in recent years we've done the 1959 LP wannabe, a 1954-spec S-type, a beat to bits interpretation of an Esquire and even a Gretsch 6120 conversion. It was bad enough when the workshop projects were just an excuse to cure my own GAS, but now that *G&B*'s editor and some of the boys in the office have caught the conversion bug, it seems as though this might never end! And to be honest, these projects are so much fun, that's just how I like it! So without further ado, it's Goldtop time.

The plan this time is to take a neglected and unloved LP-style guitar and turn it into a mid-50s-style Goldtop with P-90 pickups and a wrapover tailpiece. I'll also be removing the fingerboard to add a backing veneer that will increase the neck depth for a more authentic fat neck feel. There will be fresh frets, hopefully with fret nibs, so that means re-binding the neck and a 50s-spec nylon nut will have to be made.

The complicating factor is that the donor guitar was built for PAF-style humbucker pickups, so the existing pickup cavities will have to be plugged and re-routed for P-90s. I'll also be plugging the stop tailpiece bushings and drilling new holes for the wrapover bridge. Of course it would be a lot easier do a later spec P-90 Goldtop with a tune-o-matic, but where's the fun in that?

The modified top will almost certainly have to be re-veneered and that means re-binding the body, too. Some of the existing plastic parts and hardware will be reused, but the search is on for period-correct control knobs, cavity covers and a pickguard. A set of authentic-looking 'grey tiger' tone capacitors would also add to the sonic vibe and I'm looking forward to testing some P-90 pickups...

Body snatching

I bought this guitar several years ago as a stripped down husk. It's actually a 1989 Greco, although I can't be certain of the exact model. This guitar was made towards the end of the first 'golden era' of Japanese guitar making and it must be said that it's not as well made as the Greco I used for the '59 Burst-inspired project we did a few years back.

The fret installation is nothing like as good and you can tell it's

from the lower end of Greco's product range because it doesn't have fret nibs. The frets are also somewhat larger than vintage-spec Gibson wire. There is also a structural issue that makes the bridge replacement unavoidable. The original tailpiece and bridge were installed off-centre, so the strings were always skewed towards to the bass side of the guitar – it certainly wasn't like that on an original Goldtop!

However, despite the various issues, there are still numerous plus points that make this guitar a good candidate for conversion. Despite the lower quality workmanship, Grecos of this era still had long tenon neck joints, which is more than you can say for 1980s Gibsons! Other 1950s-correct features that the Grecos retained include volute-free necks and a correct back angle for the headstock.

The mahogany body appears to be a two-piece, with a join just under the control cavity. The cap is centre-jointed solid maple but it's very much a plain top and it's not bookmatched. The stacked heel is another inauthentic feature, so because of that and the body join this guitar will either end up as an all-gold or a dark back Goldtop.

Although it's almost certainly East Indian rosewood, the fingerboard has an attractive reddish brown hue and the pearloid inlays have sharp points with a deep colour. So I'll be keeping those. Fortunately the headstock has never been drilled to accept more modern machine heads, so there'll be no need to convert them back to take Kluson-style tuners.

But the best thing of all is the body weight. Fully loaded with parts and pickups, this guitar weighs just 3.8kg/8.37lbs. Although the late-1954 All Gold that we featured in 2015 weighed in at 10lbs, the Greco's sub 9lbs weight is closer to the Minnesota Burst we looked at last year, and what we would expect from a mid-to-late 50s Les Paul. It also sounds particularly good acoustically.

"It would be a lot easier do a later spec P-90 Goldtop with a tune-o-matic, but where's the fun in that?"

Switch craft

Stripping the Greco back down to the body is a fairly straightforward process. I begin by cutting off the five remaining strings then removing the bridge and tailpiece. Strings go in the recycling but when working on these types of project, I always use an old takeaway container to collect the parts and keep everything in one place.

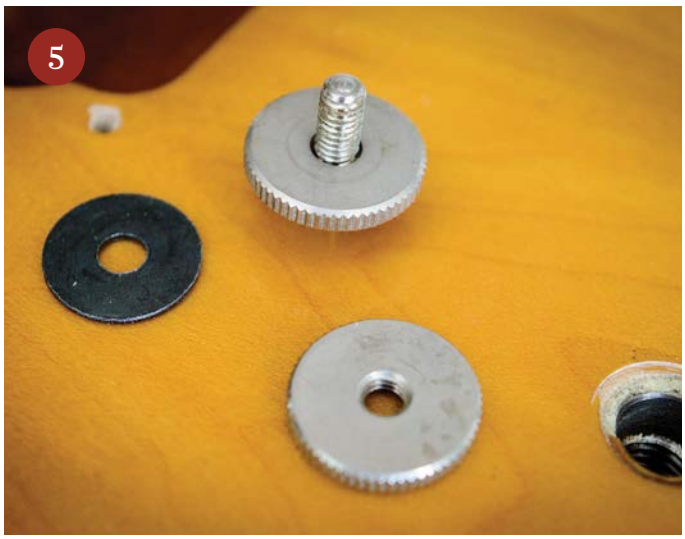
The switch wires are then de-soldered from the volume potentiometers and the output jack and pulled out along with the switch. By removing the pot nuts and pointers, you should be able to lift out the complete control assembly – once you've disconnected the ground wire.

After unscrewing the strap buttons and removing the tuners, next I have to get the tuners' bushings out. Quite often they're wedged in tight but you should avoid any temptation to prise them out from the front because you will almost certainly damage the headstock face.

Instead, place a flat head screwdriver through the post holes at the back of the headstock, put the screwdriver against the back of the bushing and tap the screwdriver gently with a small hammer. Move the screwdriver tip around the bushing and use very little force. You should see the bushing begin to move out of its hole and eventually pop out. The idea is to avoid damage to the postholes and the veneer overlay. It's a simple procedure and once you've done the first one, simply rinse and repeat until they're all out.

Bridge post and bushings

All that's left by this stage are the bridge posts and tailpiece bushings. Sometimes the bridge posts are quite loose and you can simply unscrew them, but they may be stuck tight. If that's the case, you can use the >



4 The bridge posts and stud bushings all have to be removed, but it's quite straightforward

5 The kit for post removal includes two thumbwheels with a washer placed in-between

6
DROP FORGED

7

8

thumbwheels to get them out. To do this, screw one thumbwheel half way down the post, the place a washer over the top and screw the other thumbwheel down on top of the washer.

Once that's done, slowly turn the lower washer anti-clockwise and it will tighten up against the washer and the top thumbwheel. Since the thumbwheel will then be unable to move higher up the bridge post, if you continue turning the thumbwheel anti-clockwise the post itself should start unscrewing from the body. Just keep going until it's fully extracted.

If the thumbwheel method doesn't work because you cannot get the post to turn using your fingers, replace the thumbwheels with nuts separated by a washer. You will then be able to use a spanner on the lower nut and the extra leverage should do the trick.

Getting the tailpiece stud bushings out is a bit trickier because they are pressed into the body and since no glue is used, the holes are drilled for a tight fit. Find a bolt with the same diameter and thread as your tailpiece stud. You will need to drop a short metal rod into the bushing hole before screwing in your hex bolt.

As the bolt touches the metal rod, it's prevented from getting any deeper into the hole. Keep turning and you should see the bushing begin to move and emerge from the hole. If you bolt is on the short side, you may need to remove it and add a second spacer rod before you can fully extract the bushing.

Once you're done, look inside the treble side-bushing hole and you should see the original wire that connected the tailpiece to ground. This can now be removed, but make a mental note that a new one will be needed for the relocated bridge.

At this point I take the opportunity to weigh the body once again and it's almost exactly 3kg – or 6.6lbs if you prefer. So if you are ever buying a husk or making a Les Paul style guitar, this is a good target weight to shoot for if you want to end up with a relatively lightweight mid-50s-style sub-9lbs guitar.

Strip teaser

Unfortunately, the next part of the process is by far the most tedious and dull to do, but it's also completely unavoidable! Before we can go any further the thick, brittle and impervious gloss finish has to be completely stripped off. The first task is to determine what sort of finish it is.

Nitrocellulose will come off when you wipe it with acetone >

6 Our bushing removal kit includes a bolt with the same diameter and thread as the tailpiece stud, two metal spacers from some Ikea shelves and a spanner

7 The bushing is half way out but if the bolt is too short you'll need to remove it and add a second spacer

8 With the posts and bushings extracted you can remove the ground wire from the treble side bushing hole and we're ready for stripping

9 The original back finish was a glossy crimson that made the guitar look like a toffee apple

and you can test an out of sight area with some acetone on a cotton bud. If it is nitro, you'll see the finish transfer onto the cotton bud with a couple of passes. If this is the case then stripping the finish with Nitromors is an option. Of course, the finish on this guitar isn't nitro so it's almost certainly 'poly'. Two types of poly finish can be found on guitars like this – polyurethane and polyester – but both are tough to remove.

Until quite recently you could acquire industrial strength methyl chloride-based varnish strippers to remove poly finishes. However, those pesky bureaucrats have colluded with scientists and health professionals to deny us our freedom to use this carcinogenic and environmentally damaging chemical. So, with that off the table, a heat gun is needed to strip our guitar.

There are numerous potential pitfalls in using heat guns on guitars. For one, it's easy to scorch the wood beneath the finish and melt the binding. Glue joints can also open up and too much heat may cause the neck to bend or twist. With that in mind, I set about stripping the finish.

When heated, poly tends to blister, go brittle and crack. Once that occurs it's simple enough to scrape the finish off the guitar. However after getting a little way through, I discover the poly doesn't need that much heat and merely softening it is sufficient.

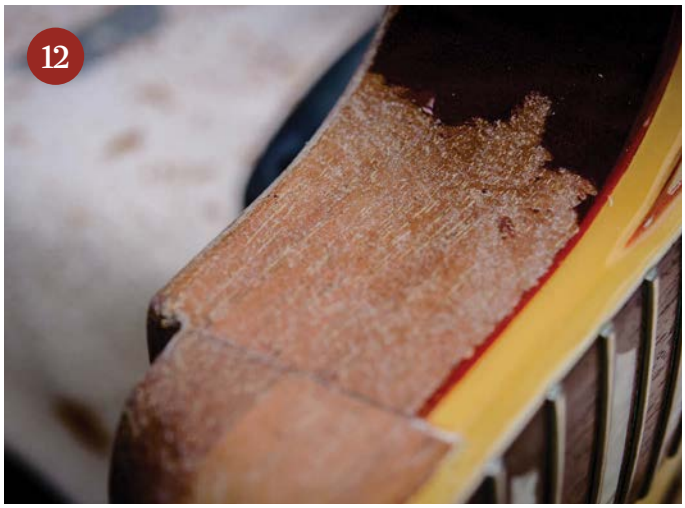
Use a fairly blunt metal scraper and slide it under the finish. If it's polyester, it might come off in long strips, but polyurethane tends to chip and splinter. Take care because hot shards of finish can fly off and burn you so cover your arms, and wear gloves and goggles. Also work outdoors, because the fumes are horrible and almost certainly bad for you.

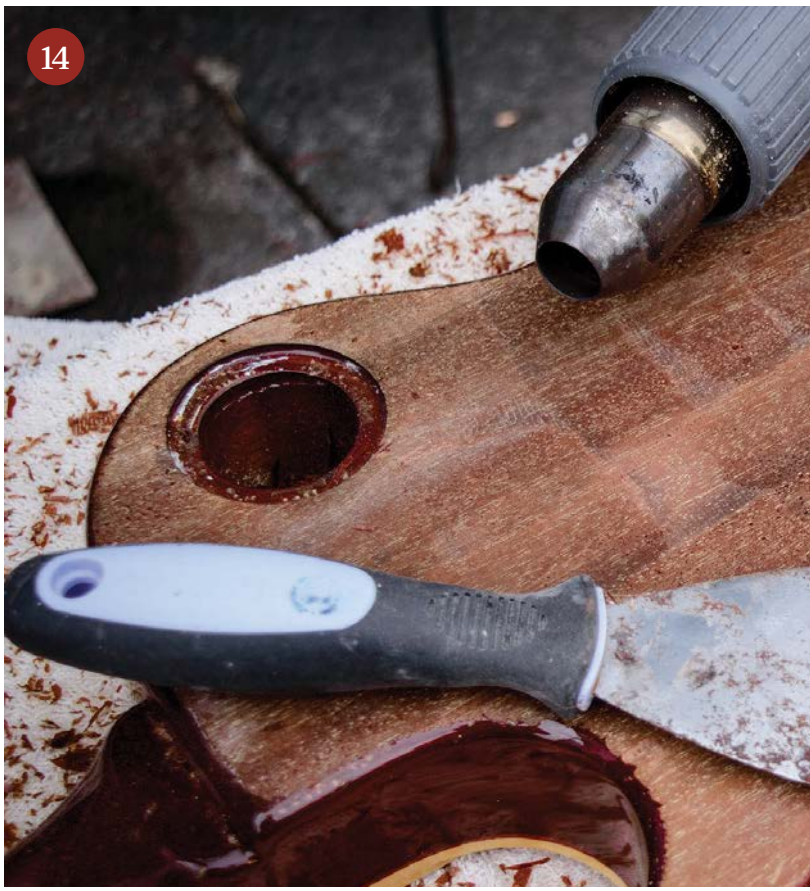
Never try to force the finish off when you feel resistance because you may end up gouging into the wood. Also if the finish is well and truly stuck on, it can lift wood fibres if you try and prise it loose. Soft open pore woods like mahogany are particularly vulnerable, but it is slightly easier to strip maple.

Inevitably, you'll probably just be getting the hang of it as you're almost done. Keep the heat gun moving and work on small areas. Don't wait for the finish to blister, but instead press your scraper against the finish and when it's ready to go, the scraper will slide under the finish. Also remember that metal scrapers will become very hot. This probably assists the removal process but be careful not to burn your fingers.

I was somewhat concerned about applying heat to the neck so I left it until last and my technique was pretty well honed by that point. I worked only on small areas and stopped after each one to allow things to cool down. All in all the whole finish removal process took me about three hours and with all the finish removed the husk ended up 150g lighter, and the tap tone was clearer and louder.

I suspect the binding may have been cellulose because it caught fire on a couple of occasions due to the heat. So be mindful of that if you try this at home. The maple came out really well but I think there's some kind of filler or base coat in the pores of the mahogany and quite a bit more scraping and sanding will be required before finish can be applied. But at least that's the boring and messy bit out of the way and now the fun can really begin!





10 Heat will cause the finish to blister but you don't need to get it that hot before it will come off

11 When scraped, the heated finish comes off in strips or shards depending on whether it's polyester or polyurethane

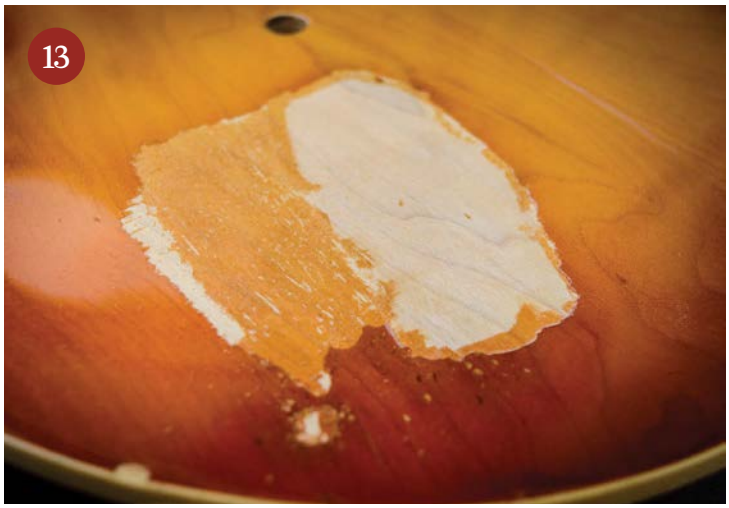
12 When stripping the neck and body the finish is left intact on the flammable binding because it will eventually be replaced

13 Stripping the maple is far easier because the gloss coats were applied over a softer tinted base coat

14 After stripping, the back looks a bit of a mess, but with a bit of scraping and sanding it should end up okay

NEXT MONTH...

Huw takes a break from Goldtops and grasps with the intimacies of Jazzmaster setup and wiring



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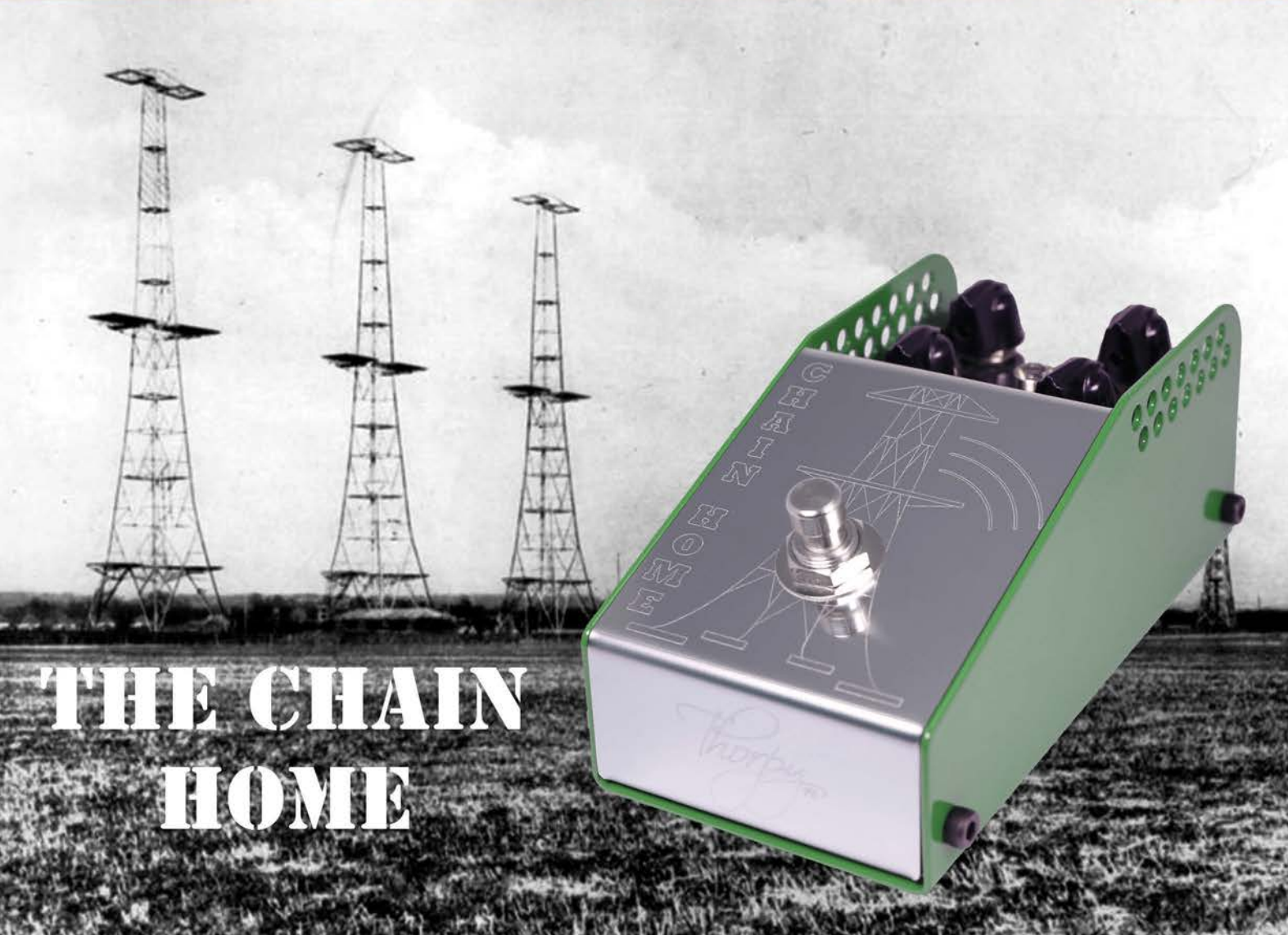
CHAIN HOME
THE CHAIN HOME

Gear Reviews

This month's *G&B* reviews section is absolutely jam-packed with the hottest new gear from around the guitar world, from affordable takes on boutique beauties to hi-tech offerings from the biggest name in the business, via back from the dead Brit brands and high-end recreations of some 1950s icons. So, turn the page and prepare to drool...

Gretsch '53 Duo Jet & '59 Silver Jet 58
Two Vintage Select single-cuts from the golden age

Shergold Masquerader SM-01, SM-02, SM-03 64
UK brand reborn with the help of Patrick James Eggle

PRS Reclaimed Limited S2 Vela Semi-Hollow & SE 245 Zebrawood Limited Edition 70
Two limited-run guitars with interesting tops

B&G Guitars Little Sister Crossroads 74
The boutique Israeli maker pitches for the masses

D'Angelico Premier Series EXL-1 78
Classic jazzbox tones from a more modern package

Fender Mustang GT 100 & GT 40 80
The big F reveals its most advanced amps ever

Stone Deaf SD30 combo 84
UK-made digitally controlled valve combo

Positive Grid Bias Head 88
High-end melding of software and hardware

Echopark F-2 Dual Stage Fuzz 91
Stripped-down boutique fuzz from California

DigiTech Freqout 92
All the feedback you could ever want, in a pedal

House Of Tone Heavy House P-94 set 95
Humbucker-sized P-90s with tone for days

Bigsby
GRETSCH

The Jet Set

That 'Great Gretsch Sound' means very different things to different people, and often has a lot to do with which of the company's iconic pickups you like the best. With a pair of period-accurate new Jets from the firm's Vintage Select range to hand, **HUW PRICE** finds out what that sound is like today...

Last year, Gretsch revitalised its high-end hollowbody offering with the addition of the golden age-aping Vintage Select and gig-ready Player's Edition ranges to the Japan-made line, but the Jet series was left untouched... until now. For 2017, the company's less imposing body outline is the subject of a series of reissue Vintage Select Edition models based on specific years of manufacture. Here, we've got our hands on the '53 Duo Jet and a '59 Silver Jet. You'll find these Jets listed in the solidbody section on Gretsch's website but both guitars of course have chambered mahogany bodies and set mahogany necks. The 1950s saw a great deal of change for the Jet, and our review guitars are well placed to give us an overview of the evolution of the model in that decade.

Gretsch G6128T-53 Vintage Select '53 Duo Jet

When Gibson released the Les Paul in 1952, Gretsch's response was rapid. This 1953 model is, in Gretsch vernacular, a 'scripty Jet' because of its headstock logo. According to Gretsch expert Ed Ball, this can only be seen on the first batch of Duo Jets, which also feartured a 'bullet' truss rod cover, early-style white pickguard and no block inlay at the first fret.

The standard model came with a Melita bridge and a G-stamp tailpiece, so contemporary Duo Jet players such as Cliff Gallup and George Harrison who wanted a Bigsby vibrato had to get them retro-fitted. With that in mind, we're pleased to see a consideration to the wobblers here with a factory Bigsby, along with the matching aluminium bridge. The bridge bottom is rounded for rocking against the thumbwheels when the Bigsby is in use and sits on a traditional archtop-style rosewood base that is fixed rather than floating, so you can play power chords and bend strings without the bridge moving.

DeArmond pickups were standard issue on all high-end Gretsch electrics prior to 1957, and this guitar has TV Jones' highly regarded >

The Sparkle Jet's finish was originally drum shell wrap

Period-correct details include non-logo'd knobs on the Duo Jet

The Duo Jet's aluminium bridge is solid and reliable

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

GRETSCH G6128T-53 VINTAGE SELECT '53 DUO JET

It's quite hard to find production guitars with DeArmond-style pickups that aren't made by Gretsch, however there are custom builders who can oblige. Check out the **Koll Duo Glide, CB Hill Speedster** and TV Jones' own **Spectra Sonic**. Contact the builders for pricing

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

GRETSCH G6129T-59 VINTAGE SELECT '59 SILVER JET

Compared to DeArmonds, Filter'Trons have become fairly mainstream and you can find them in various **Fender La Cabronita Telecasters**, the **Michael Kelly TV50 (£819)** and the **Collings SoCo LC (£4,995)**. If you're more interested in the looks and the chambering than the pickups, check out the **Duesenberg Starplayer III Sparkle (£1,174)**

T-Armond reissues. Controls comprise a master volume with individual pickup volumes and a master tone. The single switch above the fingerboard is a regular three-way pickup selector.

The mahogany is stained to a mid-brown and the clear gloss finish reveals one-piece neck construction. The body isn't carved from a single piece, but the joint is so artfully done it takes an experienced eye to spot it.

G6129T-59 Vintage Select '59 Silver Jet

Unlike the Duo Jet, the Silver Jet's top isn't painted. Instead, it's covered with a thin plastic layer that's glued over the maple laminate top. Gretsch was able to do this because it is, of course, also a drum maker and the drums were being manufactured in the same factory as the guitars back in the 1950s – these nitron coverings were also used to wrap drum shells.

> Through vintage-style tweed and Vox amps, the Duo Jet's tone is incredibly evocative

The Silver Jet's top has large metallic silver and grey flakes and it is exactly right for a '59 model.

Again we see a 50s-spec Bigsby in residence, but this time the centre section has been in-filled with black lacquer and it's matched to a Space Control bridge sitting on an ebony base. This reissue bridge is somewhat modified, but given the original's notorious reputation for buzzing, sitaring and all manner of sonic annoyances, that may be regarded as a positive.

Again we see TV Jones pickups – this time Classic Filter'Tron humbuckers as befits a late 50s model. Other period-correct features include the 'G' stamped control knobs, a teardrop shaped truss rod cover and thumbnail markers set into an ebony fingerboard. From a player's perspective the key change is the tone switch replacing the conventional tone control. It provides two pre-set levels of treble roll off and is bypassed in the centre position.

In Use

Unplugged, the Duo Jet has a natural brightness and metallic airy shimmer. It's also very loud, crisply defined and has fantastic sustain. The 'U' profile neck feels contemporary and it's far shallower than the neck of

The Sparkle Jet has the more common G-logo knobs on it

Both guitars feature paper-in-oil tone capacitors

The TV Jones take on a Dynasonic pickup is faithful and impressive

the vintage 1955 Jet Firebird that we featured in the mag last year.

DeArmond Dynasonics are among our favourite pickups and this encounter with TV Jones' version doesn't disappoint. There's high sensitivity, a very high output, even higher fidelity, and extended treble that never sounds shrill. You should regard the factory's standard radius matching polepiece arc as a starting point and adjust the slug heights for optimum string-to-string balance.

Through vintage-style tweed and Vox amps the Duo Jet's tone is incredibly evocative. The bridge has a fat Tele-type quack with a throaty midrange resonance that's not dissimilar to a stuck-wah. The neck has a plummier and more rounded tone with less of the nasal cocked-wah character.

It's upright piano-like in harmonic content and you can use your pick as an EQ control, such is the shift from flutey roundness to a woody twang as you move from neck to bridge. The middle setting is equally distinctive, with a pronounced phasey midrange and softer transients.

The Dynasonics combine single-coil clarity and treble with the output of hot humbuckers, so they'll overdrive amps with ease. Whether you're summoning the spirit of rockabilly or grinding out contemporary rock through a boutique combo, the Duo Jet remains an endlessly fascinating instrument.

Moving onto the Silver Jet, assuming the bodies are constructed identically, the difference in unplugged tone between the two Jets is remarkable. The '59 has a thicker, darker and more muted tone that's closer to a typical 'solidbody'. Since Gretsch folk can get pretty obsessive about these things, it's likely we're hearing the differences between the Bigsby and Space Control bridges,

The Duo Jet (left) sports Gretsch's much less common script logo

The quirky Space Control bridge has thankfully been updated here

but the Silver Jet is noticeably heavier in physical terms, too.

The Silver Jet has a softer and less in-your-face tone that makes it somewhat easier to play than the no-place-to-hide T-Armonds. It's warmer, smoother and woodier, but perhaps less exciting. For straight-ahead rock rhythm and smooth sustain, the less lively unplugged nature of the Silver Jet and TV Jones's updated take on Filter'Trons combine to produce a more generally usable tone.

The Duo Jet is pure classic Gretsch, yet while the Silver Jet can deliver those famous Gretschy sounds, you can also dial in tones that are closer to LP Specials and Standards – but always with a hint of hollow warmth.

Some Dynasonic qualities can be detected in the Filter'Trons, such as midrange resonance and twanginess, but they're less pronounced and the frequency range is narrower. The Filter'Trons are also darker, more aggressive and a little hazier across the upper mids, which is more of a fit for overdrive and distortion.

While their retro bridge designs mean you have to give these guitars a bit of leeway in terms of intonation, here the bridges themselves are actually a bit too far forward, so notes fret slightly sharp at the 12th fret. Also sharp are the edges under the Bigsby arms and the springs are soft, so tuning can sometimes be a chore. But eccentricities are part of the charm of period-correct guitars, and when they look and sound as downright fantastic as this pair do, it's a price worth paying.

KEY FEATURES

Gretsch G6128T-53 Vintage Select '53 Duo Jet

- **PRICE** £2,529
- **DESCRIPTION** Semi-solid 6-string electric guitar. Made in Japan
- **BUILD** Laminated maple top and chambered mahogany body, set mahogany neck with medium U profile, 12" radius ebony fingerboard with pearloid block markers and 22 medium jumbo frets
- **HARDWARE** Bigsby vibrato with matching aluminium Bigsby bridge, open gear Grover tuners, plain top knobs
- **ELECTRICS** TV Jones T-Armond single-coil pickups, master volume, master tone, individual volume controls, three-way selector switch
- **SCALE LENGTH** 625mm/24.6"
- **NECK WIDTH** 42mm at nut, 52mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 19mm at first fret, 23mm at 12th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 35.5mm at nut, 51.5mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 3.29kg/7.25lbs
- **LEFT HANDERS** No
- **FINISHES** Black top, light clear gloss back and neck
- **CONTACT** Fender EMEA 01342 331700 **www.gretschguitars.com**

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Stunning looks
+ Very distinct sounds
+ Quality tuners

– Intonation issues
– Nut pings and bridge buzzes
– Excessively soft Bigsby spring

An undeniably cool guitar with vintage-correct details and a tone that's absolutely stunning both plugged and unplugged

9/10

KEY FEATURES

Gretsch G6129T-59 Vintage Select '59 Silver Jet

- **PRICE** £2,609
- **DESCRIPTION** Semi-solid 6-string electric guitar. Made in Japan
- **BUILD** Laminated maple top and chambered mahogany body, set mahogany neck with medium U profile, 12" radius rosewood fingerboard with pearloid thumbnail markers and 22 medium jumbo frets
- **HARDWARE** Bigsby vibrato, contemporary Space Control bridge, open-gear Grover tuners, 'G' top knobs
- **ELECTRICS** TV Jones Classic Filter'Tron humbucking pickups, master volume, individual volume controls, three-way tone switch, three-way pickup selector switch
- **SCALE LENGTH** 625mm/24.6"
- **NECK WIDTH** 42mm at nut, 52.5mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 19mm at first fret, 23mm at 12th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 35.5mm at nut, 51.5mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 3.75kg/8.27lbs
- **LEFT HANDERS** No
- **FINISHES** Silver sparkle nitron top, clear gloss back and neck

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Eye-catching looks
+ Genuinely usable 'mud switch'
+ Quality tuners

– Intonation issues
– Nut pings and bridge buzzes
– Excessively soft Bigsby spring

With a nice upgrade to the notoriously troublesome Space Control bridge and those unique eye-catching looks, this sparkles in more ways than one

8/10

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Shergold Masquerader
SM01-SD, SM02-SD & SM03-SD

A legendary British name makes a welcome comeback with three new models designed by legendary luthier, Patrick James Eggle. **SIMON BRADLEY** goes for gold...

Shergold is one of those guitar names that will bring a tear to the eye of the more grizzled of Brit-rock fans, especially those who'll remember Genesis's Mike Rutherford wielding custom guitar/bass double-necks back in the day. An original model that was much more accessible to the man in the street, however, was the Masquerader, produced from 1975 to around 1981-ish. It boasted an unmistakable look that featured Gothic script on the scratchplate plus two humbuckers controlled by slider switches that not only allowed you to split the coils but also combine them both in series and out of phase. Dig out that dusty copy of Joy Division's *Unknown Pleasures* to hear what a Masquerader can do in the hands of Bernard Sumner.

Times were lean from 1982 onwards, however, and despite a tentative return in the late-90s, the brand had broadly fallen out of the public consciousness. But in 2015 the story came full circle, with original distributors Barnes & Mullins buying the Shergold Guitar Company. That brings us to today, and a trio of new Masqueraders, each designed by UK luthier Patrick James Eggle.

"I was already working with Barnes & Mullins with the Faith project, and after they'd bought Shergold a few years back, they >

The headstock sports a destinctive Shergold 'shield' logo

spoke to me about doing the same thing." Eggle tells *G&B*. "I was already aware of the Shergold guitars of old. When I was 13 years old or so, my dad took me out to buy me my first electric guitar, so we went to this place in Hendon and the first guitar I picked up was a Shergold. It was a 12-string, so we didn't buy it, but I've always remembered them and always thought they had a certain coolness about them."

The Masquerader is the Shergold model most people will be familiar with, and the double-cutaway body shape of the new incarnation is similar to that of the originals.

"We've got an original Masquerader here in the workshop and I did look at it quite a bit," confirms Eggle. "I didn't slavishly want to do a reproduction, although I did want to keep the essence of it if I could. I wanted to bring it up to date and make it a bit more relevant, and didn't think the original design would fit my criteria as a player's guitar."

"With ergonomic shaping and smoothly rounded edges the guitars are pleasantly tactile to snuggle up to"

The dimensions of both the bodies and necks of all three guitars we have here are the same, so any observations we make are applicable to all and, aside from the finishes, the only obvious differences are the with the pickup combinations, which we'll get to in due course.

With the new guitars being manufactured in Indonesia before shipping to the UK for setup and QC, Eggle was able to opt for mahogany as the body material, as he explains.

"Where the guitars are built in Indonesia there is a good supply of sustainably-sourced mahogany and if we were to use, say, alder, it would need to be imported, which would push the price of the instrument up. It also wouldn't necessarily make for a better guitar either. Okay, so a bolt-on neck, mahogany guitar isn't really the norm but I don't think that's a bad thing and it does give us an angle."

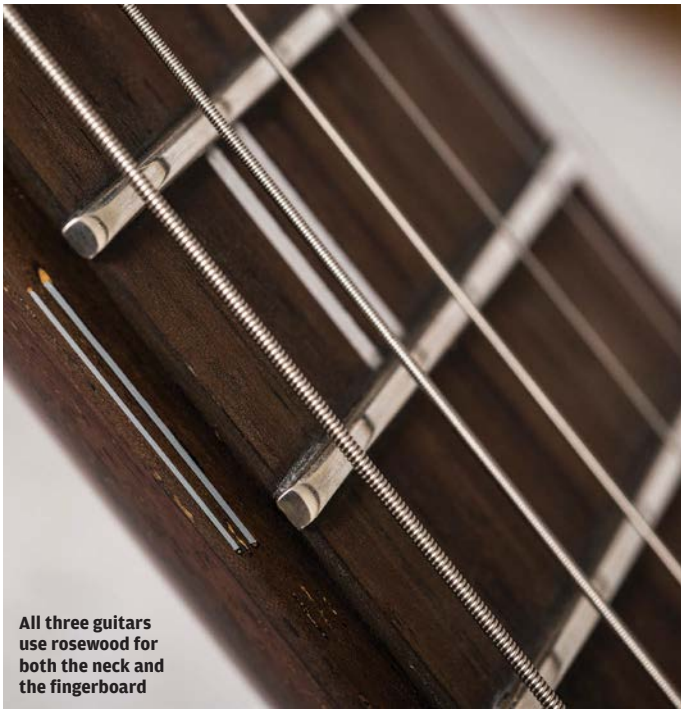
With ergonomic shaping, belly and forearm contours, and smoothly rounded edges, the guitars are pleasantly tactile to snuggle up to, and the four-bolt heel also benefits from a subtle level of recessing.

On top of the bodies, the necks themselves are all-rosewood – something that's very out of the ordinary, especially at this price point. They certainly feel very special, though, with a super-smooth satin 'hand burnished' finish.

"That's my expression for what I do with cellulose lacquer on my own guitars." Eggle explains of the finish. "The lacquer is sprayed on in the same way as if it were to be polished up to a high gloss, and when you have that 'off the [spray] gun' finish you get a sort of orange peel texture to it. That's fine when the guitar's new but as it starts to polish up through playing, you do notice it more and more, and it doesn't really look all that good. So what I do is use a high-gloss nitro lacquer, flat it back with 800 [grade paper], and use something called renaissance wax and a fine wire wool to literally burnish it with my hand. It gives the wood this sort of luster and it stays like that."

While not as clubby as some US Music Man guitars we've played, the comfort is not a million miles away,

The subtle recessing around the heel improves playing comfort at the neck's upper reaches



All three guitars use rosewood for both the neck and the fingerboard

which is impressive. The headstock is all-new too, with a modern GraphTech nut and three-a-side configuration of locking tuners offset by the classic Shergold shield. In addition, while the measurements of all the guitars are the same, there is a very slight yet discernible difference in profile between our three, perhaps due to them being hand-shaped using a template.

The original Masquerader's dual humbuckers could be split and phase-reversed to obtain a wide spectrum of tones and, while Eggle hasn't gone quite as far as to include the slider switches, he has opted for pickups from the hotter side of the Seymour Duncan catalogue.

"We wanted a high-output pickup in the bridge that had the right string-spacing. It came from conversations I had with the guys at Seymour Duncan and we went with both what they recommended and what we wanted to use," Eggle expands. "We get a good consistency and they do have a great reputation, and having worked the figures out, it's nice to be able to put Duncans into guitars at this price."

The SM01 and SM02 both feature an Alnico V TB-4 JB Trembucker in the bridge, accompanied either by a stacked P-90 or a pair of over-wound SSL-6 Custom Flat single coils, the centrally-located of the latter being reversed-wound to offer hum-cancelling when combined with its sibling. It's the SM03 that's something of a black sheep, with its bridge-loaded STL-2 Hot Tele single coil kept company by a pair of SSL-2 Vintage Flat Strat singles.

With either a three-way or five-way selector depending on pickup complement and a single volume and tone pot (those fitted to the SM03 are rated at 250k rather than the normal 500k pots for SSS electrics), the guitars are straightforward to use, with the SM01 and SM02 also incorporating a push/pull humbucker coil split.

In Use

It's easy, not mention great fun, to become consumed by the voodoo surrounding pickups, but, with the SSL-6's DC resistance rated at 13.3k in comparison to the SSL-2's 6.5k, we assumed the SM01 and SM02 would provide modern tones, with the SM03 offering a more restrained performance. However, while broadly true, all three guitars possess an exceedingly dark character to their tone that, had Eggle opted for some more subtle pickups, could have been overpowering.

The marriage of mahogany and rosewood is immediately apparent in the thick chocolatey sound that comes from the TH-4 in both the SM01 and SM02. It was part of Eggle's desire to make these new Shergolds suitable for rock and he's certainly succeeded. Billy Gibbons, AIC's Jerry Cantrell and even Angus Young all come to mind when riffing away, with the low-end almost overpowering at times. Upping the gain clarifies trebles and tightens rhythms, while the massive sound resulting from downtuning should carry a health warning.

In contrast, the SM03 is, as expected, slightly more reserved but no less fun to play. It tonally mixes the best parts of a Tele and >

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

SM01-SD

Gibson's SG 50s Tribute (£POA) features a mahogany body and a pair of Alnico 5 P-90 pickups, and the neck's rounded profile makes it a doddle to get to grips with. Gordon Smith still offers some great guitars, with the **GS-1** starting at a mere **£600**, while the **Godin Core P-90 (£799)** mixes an excellent build quality with two Duncan P-90s

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

SM02-SD

Fender offers a number of HSS-configured Strats, with the **Standard HSS (£569)** especially good value. The charcoal metallic version of **LTD's SN-1000W (£699 approx)**, with a bridge-loaded Duncan Custom 5 'bucker, certainly looks the part and, for a real vintage treat, the singlecut **Burns Sonic (£695)** features two TriSonic pickups, a scroll headstock and a Rez-o-Tube hard tail bridge

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

SM03-SD

Combining the standard Tele single coils with a centrally-located Strat pickup, the **Fender Deluxe Nashville Telecaster (£739)** offers tonal versatility with the classic look. The reinvigorated **Ibanez Talman TM1702M (£1,149)** includes two Duncan Alnico II Tele pickups and playable 60's-style maple neck and, for those on a budget, the **Vintage V58JD (£379)** is well worth a look

The neck's hand-burnished satin finish is hugely playable

All three guitars use Shergold's Custom T ashtray-style bridges

KEY FEATURES

Shergold Masquerader SM01-SD

- **PRICE** £765
- **DESCRIPTION** Solidbody 6-string guitar with a gloss polyurethane finish on the body. Manufactured in Indonesia, setup in the UK
- **BUILD** Mahogany body with high-gloss polyurethane finish and Bakelite (as reviewed) or brushed silver scratchplate; bolt-on solid rosewood neck with hand-burnished satin finish; rosewood fingerboard with a 304.8mm/12" radius; 22 medium-jumbo nickel frets and hand-inlaid aluminium fret and side position markers; GraphTech Tusq nut
- **HARDWARE** Shergold Custom T bridge with compensated brass saddles; locking tuners
- **ELECTRICS** Seymour Duncan TB-4 JB Trembucker (bridge), P-901N stacked single coil (neck)
- **CONTROLS** Volume and tone A500k pots; push/pull coil split for humbucker; 3-way blade selector
- **SCALE LENGTH** 648mm/25.5"
- **NECK WIDTH** Nut 42.5mm; 12th fret 52mm
- **NECK DEPTH** 1st fret 24mm; 12th fret 25mm
- **STRING SPACING** Nut 36mm; bridge 53.5mm
- **WEIGHT** 3.18kgs/7lbs
- **FINISHES** Thru-Cherry (as reviewed), Thru-Black, Thru-Dirty Blonde and Battleship Grey

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Massive tone
+ Lovely neck
+ Great price

- Maybe too tonally dark for some
- No case included

A true rock guitar in vintage-vibed clothing, with tones that go from full-on hard rock to fat blues all the flick of a selector switch

8/10

KEY FEATURES

Shergold Masquerader SM02-SD

- **PRICE** £835
- **DESCRIPTION** Solidbody 6-string guitar with a gloss polyurethane finish on the body. Manufactured in Indonesia, setup in the UK
- **BUILD** Mahogany body with high-gloss polyurethane finish and Bakelite (as reviewed) or brushed silver scratchplate; bolt-on solid rosewood neck with satin finish; rosewood 'board with 304.8mm/12" radius; 22 medium-jumbo nickel frets and aluminium fret and side position markers; GraphTech Tusq nut
- **HARDWARE** Shergold Custom T bridge with compensated brass saddles; locking tuners
- **ELECTRICS** Seymour Duncan TB-4 JB Trembucker (bridge), SSL-6Rw single coil (middle, SSL-6 single coil (neck)
- **CONTROLS** Volume and tone A500k pots; push/pull coil split for humbucker; 3-way blade selector
- **SCALE LENGTH** 648mm/25.5"
- **NECK WIDTH** Nut 42.5mm; 12th fret 52mm
- **NECK DEPTH** 1st fret 24mm; 12th fret 25mm
- **STRING SPACING** Nut 36mm; bridge 53.5mm
- **WEIGHT** 3.18kgs/7lbs
- **FINISHES** As SM01-SD
- **CONTACT** Barnes & Mullins 01691 652449 **www.shergoldguitars.com**

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Smart finish
+ Tonally versatile
+ Great playability

- Possibly too powerful for some musical styles
- Inlays obscured by strings

This is a refreshingly new approach to the HSS-configured electric, in a cool Thru-Dirty Blonde finish

7/10

KEY FEATURES

Shergold Masquerader SM03-SD

- **PRICE** £809
- **DESCRIPTION** Solidbody 6-string guitar with a gloss polyurethane finish on the body. Manufactured in Indonesia, setup in the UK
- **BUILD** Mahogany body with high gloss polyurethane finish and Bakelite (as reviewed) or brushed silver scratchplate; bolt-on solid rosewood with hand-burnished satin finish; rosewood fingerboard with a 304.8mm/12" radius; 22 medium-jumbo nickel frets and hand-inlaid aluminium fret and side position markers; GraphTech Tusq nut
- **HARDWARE** Shergold Custom T bridge with compensated brass saddles; locking tuners
- **ELECTRICS** Seymour Duncan STL-2 Hot Tele single coil (bridge), SSL-2Rw Vintage Flat Strat single coil (middle), SSL-2 Vintage Flat Strat single coil (neck)
- **CONTROLS** Volume and tone A250k pots; push/pull coil split for humbuckers; 5-way blade selector
- **LEFT-HANDERS** Not yet
- **SCALE LENGTH** 648mm/25.5"
- **NECK WIDTH** Nut 42.5mm; 12th fret 52mm
- **NECK DEPTH** First fret 24mm; 12th fret 25mm
- **STRING SPACING** Nut 36mm; bridge 53.5mm
- **WEIGHT** 3.18kgs/7lbs
- **FINISHES** As SM01-SD

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Excellent pickup choice
+ Huge single coil tones

- Not actually a hot T-style like we were expecting
- That Battleship Grey finish is very subjective – we're not convinced

With a very different tone to any so-called 'hot Teles' out there, this is something that's genuinely new

8/10

Strat, with the characteristic twang and crystal highs we've all loved for decades beefed up by the tonewoods in a far more organic manner than, say, a boost circuit, would.

General highlights include the toasty wonder of the SM01's P-90, ideal for smooth bluesy chords and massive rock solos, while we'd suggest that fans of Mark Knopfler should check out the in-between tones of both the SM02 and SM03. The enhanced single-coil character on offer is inspiring and, take it from us, all tonal descriptions here are relevant irrespective of which of our test amps we used, be it a tiny Blackstar HT-1R or our Marshall 2203 and 4x12 cab.

The guitars are well-balanced when strapped on, but there is one gripe we'd bring up. The hand-laid aluminium line inlays tend to be obscured behind the strings from our point of view when playing standing up, and should stage light catch the 'board's top edge, the markers there also disappear.

We could go on and on about the tones on offer here, but we're convinced that all three offer sounds that are rarely found elsewhere, and certainly not at this price point. We'd concede that not everyone will be fans as proceedings can be almost too dark, so our advice, as ever, would be to try one. We do feel that guitars do offer something genuinely new and Eggle and the team should be applauded: if you've even felt a little underwhelmed by the usual suspects these new Shergolds could certainly be an option.

What's more, while the SM01 and SM02 certainly sound like rock guitars, they don't look it – which we rather like. The SM03 is more restrained in tone, but it's no less radical a veer away from the norm, and thanks to the burnished finish and sensible neck profile, all three play wonderfully.

Ironically, the one thing they don't resemble is an original Masquerader, but that's not strictly a bad thing – we don't remember the old-school models playing as well as this trio.

We're all aware of the powerful lure of those classic electric guitar designs, but sometimes you just want something a little bit different. These Shergolds won't be everyone's cup of tea, but that's rather the point – if you're looking for a guitar to set yourself apart, Shergold is now a great place to start.

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PRS Reclaimed Limited S2 Vela Semi-Hollow & SE 245 Zebrawood Limited Edition

Guitar & Bass AWARD CHOICE 9/10

Familiar models get exotic makeovers as one earns its stripes and the other goes full Brazilian. **CHRIS VINNICOMBE** puts them to the test...

PRS is a brand that most guitarists associate with heavily figured maple tops and vivid, eye-catching colours but this month we've got our hands on a pair of instruments that challenge that perception. From the company's offshore range and affordable USA line respectively, the SE 245 Zebrawood and Reclaimed S2 Vela Semi-Hollow are familiar models rendered with some interesting timber choices.

Longtime readers may recall that the PRS S2 Vela was the coverstar of *G&B* back in June 2015. The Vela (the Latin word for a ship's sails, 'wakefulness' in Spanish and the name of a constellation) is the product of the Maryland company's S2 line, which is also home to the company's similarly leftfield Mira and Starla, as well as Standard, Custom and Singlecut models. With the emphasis on making US-built PRS guitars affordable for the many rather than the well-heeled few, S2 guitars are manufactured in the same Stevensville factory as the company's higher-priced 'Core' models but on a separate, faster production line using a mixture of USA and imported hardware and pickups.

There's certainly something romantic about the notion of owning a musical instrument made from materials with an interesting backstory and there can be tonal benefits from using aged wood, too. Reclaimed timber has appeared in guitar manufacture for some time now but, given the current climate with regard to the regulation and availability of traditional tonewoods, upcycling and repurposing is perhaps as expedient as it is admirable. Back in 2011, Fender's Telebration line included guitars with bodies fashioned from redwood from a Californian railway bridge and old pine from a barn in Indiana. PRS's senior wood manager Michael Reid recently went further afield to Brazil to source wood from old buildings for his company's Reclaimed Limited series, which includes a CE 24 Semi-Hollow model in addition to this Vela.

Native to Brazil's south-eastern Atlantic Forest, peroba rosa and brauna preto might not exactly be well-known to the majority of luthiers or players, but they certainly look the part here. Peroba rosa (typically used for siding panels) has been selected for the top, nail holes and all, while the dense grain of brauna preto (often the material used for supporting posts) was chosen for the fretboard. A thin coat of satin nitrocellulose is in keeping with the organic vibe, while the back and comfortable Pattern Regular neck are cut from mahogany. Aside from its semi-hollow construction, the Reclaimed Vela's spec sheet will be familiar and we're more than happy to renew our acquaintance with the twin brass-saddle Plate-Style bridge, Starla bridge humbucker and Type-D neck single-coil.

Launched as a limited run at PRS Europe's March event, a limited run of SE Exotic Top models sees six of the company's SE instruments made >

The Vela's reclaimed top still sports the original nail holes in the wood

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

PRS Reclaimed Limited S2 Vela Semi-Hollow

If you can't get hold of a Reclaimed Limited Vela then the new-for-NAMM **PRS 2017 Satin Limited £1,278** is worthy of investigation. Dennis Fano's **Novo** brand is the number one destination for stunning retro offsets in reclaimed and tempered materials, but prices start at double that of the Vela. **Fender**'s **Limited Edition American Professional Pine Jazzmaster**, made from 100-year-old thermally treated wood, is set to land in the UK later this year

PRS SE 245 Zebrawood Limited Edition

We've seen the **Gibson USA Les Paul Tribute 2017 T** available to order for street prices as low as **£599**, which is frankly bonkers for a USA Les Paul with a nitro Faded Honey Burst finish. We'd also recommend shopping around for a **PRS S2 Standard Singlecut** as there are some great deals to be had out there

available with a choice of spalted maple, ebony, swamp ash or zebrawood tops and matching headstock fascias. Specifications and pricing remain otherwise identical. We managed to prise an SE 245 Zebrawood out of the sticky hands of the many retailers and rival journos at the event and drag it back to *G&B* headquarters for review.

For those who aren't fluent in PRS speak, the SE 245 is so named on account of its scale length, which bucks the company trend and loses an all-important half-inch of string length. The 24.5-inch scale delivers a looser feel than the Vela that's closer to a Les Paul (Gibson's published 24.75 inches is really more like 24.6), and the more Gibson-like vibe extends to the Wide Fat neck. You also get the SE's familiar deep mahogany/bevelled maple/figured veneer layer cake construction, though the aforementioned zebrawood provides the striking icing rather than flamed maple.

In Use

Two years ago we described the original Vela as a "serious guitar for sensible money with a juicy array of tones" that's "twangy, snappy and full of sass across the board but possesses plenty of girth when required." That all still stands but with a thinner finish and more air, it's even better.

The SE 245 is a little softer and less aggressive than some other twin-humbucker, single-cut guitars

Here in a more resonant incarnation, despite an offset aesthetic designed to appeal to the cool kids in the playground, the Vela's satisfying and versatile blend of clarity and smoothness makes it a dynamic tool for fluid soloing as well as jangle and edgy drive tones. With old nail holes and unique imperfections in the top, this is as close as Paul Reed Smith has ever come to a pawnshop relic, but the playing experience is as in-tune and well-sorted as you'd expect from one of the industry's great innovators.

Swapping over to the SE 245, the hi-gloss finish makes for a very different playing experience that is less exciting than the Vela but that's to be expected given the price differential. Although the SE 245 is a touch flabby when it comes to high gain rhythms, there's a range of creamy, vocal-sounding lead tones and it easily does that PRS 'thing' with fluid single notes rich in harmonic overtones. It's a little softer and less aggressive than some twin-humbucker, single-cut guitars, but whether such a thin slice of zebrawood has a significant effect on this guitar's accent is debatable. What's certain is that if you back off the gain, the 245's performance is prettier and more interesting than many of its rivals.

Zebrawood also features on the SE's headstock fascia

The 245's zebrawood veneer contrasts nicely with its mahogany back

KEY FEATURES

PRS Reclaimed Limited S2 Vela Semi-Hollow

- **PRICE** £1,429 (inc gigbag)
- **DESCRIPTION** Double-cutaway offset body semi-hollow electric. Made in USA
- **BUILD** Mahogany back with peroba rosa top. Set mahogany Pattern Regular neck with brauna preto fingerboard. 22 medium jumbo frets, 'Old School' bird inlays
- **HARDWARE** Nickel PRS Plate-Style twin brass-saddle bridge, Low Mass locking tuners
- **ELECTRICS** Starla humbucker (bridge) and Type-D single-coil (neck) pickups, three-way toggle pickup selector switch, volume, pull/push tone control
- **SCALE LENGTH** 25"/635mm
- **NECK WIDTH** 42.1mm at nut, 52.4mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 21.4mm at nut, 23.2mm at 12th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 34.9mm at nut, 51.3mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 6.4lbs/2.9kg
- **FINISH** Natural satin nitrocellulose
- **CONTACT**
  PRS Europe
  01223 874301
  www.prsguitarseurope.com

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Light, resonant, hard to put down
+ Bags of personality to bond with
– Neck pickup set a little low at the factory

With the Reclaimed Limiteds capped at just 600 guitars, demand will be fierce. Catch one if you can

9/10

KEY FEATURES

PRS SE 245 Zebrawood Limited Edition

- **PRICE** £775 (inc gigbag)
- **DESCRIPTION** Single-cutaway solidbody electric. Made in Korea
- **BUILD** Mahogany back with bevelled maple top and zebrawood veneer, mahogany Wide Fat neck with rosewood fretboard, bird inlays and 22 medium jumbo frets
- **HARDWARE** Nickel PRS Stoptail wrapover bridge and tuners
- **ELECTRICS** PRS SE 245 Treble and Bass humbuckers, individual pickup volume and tone controls, three-way toggle pickup selector switch
- **SCALE LENGTH** 24.5"/622mm
- **NECK WIDTH** 42.5mm at nut, 52.5mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 21.7mm at nut, 23.9mm at 12th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 35.4mm at nut, 51.9mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 7.3lbs/3.3kg
- **BUILD** Zebrawood (as reviewed), Swamp Ash, Spalted Maple or Ebony tops and headstock fascias in natural gloss polyurethane

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Striking looks
+ Rich full-fat clean and lead tones
– Lacks a little rhythm punch
– We'd like to see it in a satin finish

An affordable single-cut for gigging that offers a different visual flavour to the regular production model and stands out from the crowd as a result

8/10

ehx Loopers

The 45000 is a 4-track powerhouse SUPER LOOPER with a console-style layout for intuitive control. Each loop features four tracks and it delivers unlimited standard, reverse and variable speed overdubbing, speed control, stereo loop recording and much more. This looping tour de force also syncs to MIDI clock and saves directly to SD Cards.

Optional external Foot Controller.

The 22500 Dual Stereo Looper's loops can be locked to each other or run independently in free form. It lets you do verse/chorus switching in Sequential mode, or two-loop simultaneous playback in Parallel mode. A phantom-powered mic input adds convenience. The compact 22500 also includes 16 Drum/Rhythm tracks, or import your own!

Optional external Foot Controller.

With 12 minutes of stereo loop recording on 10 banks that remain in memory until you erase them, plus unlimited Standard, Reverse and ½ Speed overdubbing and an adjustable Fade Out mode, the 720 Stereo Looper packs plenty of power in a compact pedalboard friendly design.

Boasting 6 minutes of looping time, the super-affordable 360 lets you record, store and recall 11 loops. Single footswitch control of record, erase, undo-redo and unlimited overdubbing, plus a compact size and easy-to-use functionality, complete the picture.

electro-harmonix

WWW.EHX.COM

Little Sister

The unique stylings of the Israel-made Little Sister endure on the Crossroads

B&G Guitars Little Sister Crossroads

B&G Guitars prepares to step into the big time with the alluringly affordable Little Sister Crossroads. **HUW PRICE** discovers that it's no hard bargain...

Guitar & Bass AWARD CHOICE 9/10

Crossroads loom large in blues iconography – being emblematic of change and tough choices. You can continue on the same path, head in new directions or go back the way you came, but standing still is not an option. And so it was for B&G.

According to CEO Avi Goldfinger, it was never B&G's intention to be exclusively a boutique guitar maker. B&Gs have always been made in Tel Aviv, but even working flat out, the company only completes around 30 instruments monthly and demand outstrips supply.

So B&G decided to outsource production to increase capacity and offer the standard model at a lower price point. Various options were considered, including opening a factory in Israel, but having crunched the numbers Goldfinger recognised that hitting that price point would compromise quality.

Instead, he turned to Asia, and began researching factories and checking samples. The stumbling blocks were specifying the correct woods and achieving a thin finish, but the best match was eventually found with a factory in China.

Once prototypes were completed, B&G's co-founders and head luthiers Eliran Barashi and Yotam Goldstein went to China to provide feedback and technical training for the factory employees. Now everything is up and running and the Little Sister Crossroads retails for just under 40 per cent of the cost for Private Build equivalents. The Tel Aviv operation will now concentrate just on custom orders with a wide variety of options.

Picking up a Little Sister Crossroads for the first time feels like catching up with an old friend

So, what's different? Well, not a lot, as it turns out, because B&G envisaged the Crossroads and Private Build models akin to Fender's American Standard and Custom Shop models. Consequently the quality remains high.

The body is made of three pieces of African mahogany, rather than a single piece, and the fingerboard dots are plastic rather than pearl, but the latter has more to do with recent export restrictions than cost cutting.

Rather than nitro lacquer, there's an ultra thin UV-cured poly finish that looks and feels almost identical and the pickups, electronics and hardware all come from China and Korea. Modern glues are used rather than the vintage-spec animal protein and urea formaldehyde ones reserved for the Private Builds.

This Crossroads has B&G's soft 'V' neck profile, P-90s and a tobacco sunburst finish, while a brass pickguard costs extra. Key elements shared with Private Builds include the vintage-style truss rod, Golden Age Restoration tuners, a one-piece >

KEY FEATURES

B&G Guitars Little Sister Crossroads

- **PRICE** £1,550
- **DESCRIPTION** Semi-solid electric guitar, manufactured in China
- **BUILD** Chambered African mahogany body with bookmatched flame maple cap, one-piece African mahogany set neck with soft 'V' profile, 12" radius Indian rosewood fingerboard with dot inlays and 20 frets
- **HARDWARE** Solid brass tailpiece, tune-o-matic bridge, Stewart MacDonald Golden Age Restoration tuners
- **ELECTRICS** Potted P-90-style single-coil pickups, master volume and tone, 3-way selector switch
- **SCALE LENGTH** 628mm/24.75"
- **NECK WIDTH** 42.5mm at nut, 53.5mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 21mm at first fret, 21.5mm at 9th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 35mm at nut, 51.5mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 3.225kg/7.11lbs
- **FINISHES** Tobacco sunburst
- **LEFT HANDERS** Please enquire
- **CONTACT** The North American Guitar 0207 835 5597
  www.bngguitars.com
  thenorthamericanguitar.com

The three-in-line tuners are aged Stew Mac units

B&G offers Private Build pickups, bridge and wiring loom as retro-fit extras

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

More post- than pre-war, the **Duesenberg Caribou (£1,600)** has ultra cool styling, a chambered alder body and a P-90 neck unit matched with a humbucker in the bridge. **Guild**'s **M-75 Aristocrat (£884)** features a small single-cut hollow body with no f-holes, a trapeze tailpiece and two P-90-style pickups

neck and figured solid book-matched maple tops with faux binding.

But there's a twist – should you want to narrow the gap between a production model and the Israel-built line while spreading the cost out a bit, B&G offers its Private Build-spec pre-wired harness, solid brass bridge and pickups as aftermarket items.

This model is so new we've been sent a prototype, so we have to take it on trust that the production models are built to the same standard. We're told this review model's neck profile is a little fatter and less V shaped than the production guitar, and once production is fully underway, the fingerboards will be ovangkol rather than East Indian rosewood.

In Use

Like the Tel Aviv-made model we tested last year, the Crossroads feels like the easiest playing and best sustaining parlour imaginable, however the deeper non-cutaway body here intensifies the effect (it's also available as a cutaway should you want one). The unplugged tone is reminiscent of a really good ES-335, but with more jangly sparkle and bass definition at the expense of some low midrange woodiness.

The pickups certainly do the Crossroads justice by taking those acoustic qualities and running them into raunchy and powerful overdrive with ample harmonic bloom, impressive definition and plenty of tonal contrast between the three positions. They're quite microphonic, however, despite being wax potted.

While the bridge quacks and growls, the neck is fuller, rounder and woodier. The semi-solid tonal characteristics are also more apparent in the neck and middle settings and although it sustains like a solidbody, the fullness of the tone is somehow more ES-175 than ES-330.

The pickups are set quite low out of the box, and raising them improves clarity, touch sensitivity and sustain – just like vintage P-90s. Even so we can't quite hear the harmonic sheen of the real deal and with the stock wiring, things darken slightly as you back off the volume.

Maybe the wiring upgrade would remedy that, but instead we opt to move the tone potentiometer feed wire from the input to the output of the volume potentiometer, 1950s style. Problem solved!

The brass bridge weighs 15g more than the standard gold-plated one, and the difference in tone is noticeable both acoustically and electrically. With the brass there's a marked increase in sparkling frequencies, note separation, twang and sustain. We also hear more of the acoustic character coming through and the Crossroads' touch dynamics improve. The wiring loom upgrade isn't quite as much of a no brainer, however. You could buy the individual components for a lot less money, but obviously you'd have to put it together yourself – whether that's worth it depends on whether your time or your money is worth more!

The pickup-swapping outcome isn't as clear-cut as you might expect either. The Private Build pickups are refined and certainly mellower, with a more pronounced upper harmonic bloom and vocal articulation. They're not as clear, however, and there's less contrast between the neck and bridge. The middle setting has plenty of character, but lacks that harmonically loaded vintage 'brrrang' from the bridge and horn-like bark from the neck. Their softer tone is superb for warmer clean and semi-driven picking, but less exciting for rockier styles. We like both sets for different reasons – which you prefer is down to personal taste.

We loved the original Little Sister so much, we were both excited and a little apprehensive about B&G's move to mass production. We needn't have worried – picking up a Crossroads for the first time feels like catching up with an old friend, and it's actually hard to find the catch as to why this guitar is less than half the price of its sibling. B&G went down to the crossroads, and has come back with its soul fully intact.

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Gorgeous and plays superbly
+ Raunchier pickups than the Private Build models
+ Excellent tuners

- Stock bridge doesn't bring out the best tone
- Heel slightly restricts upper fret access
- Pinging from the Tusq nut

B&G has cut costs without cutting quality and if you're happy with the finish options and neck profile, it's a phenomenal guitar for the money

9/10

stroboCLIP HD™

With the same 0.1 cent accuracy as all Peterson Strobe Tuners, the new **StroboClip HD™** comes complete with a bright high-definition screen, over 50 Sweetened™ tunings and soft rubber-lined jaws to protect your instrument's finish while offering a firm grip for maximum signal tracking.

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INTRODUCING

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D'Angelico Premier Series EXL-1

The late New York City luthier's iconic jazz guitar line returns in its latest incarnation. **ED MITCHELL** takes a stroll down the Big Apple's Great White Way...

If you're after a big-bodied jazzer then you'll likely have come across the D'Angelico brand by now. Based around the timeless designs of New York luthier John D'Angelico, his namesake guitars feature Art Deco appointments that recall the Big Apple jazz scene at its coolest. The new Premier EXL-1 focuses that Gotham style into an affordable Indonesian-made package, delivered in a striking white finish. More on that in a New York minute...

Construction here is your classic big jazz guitar recipe. Back and sides are three-inch deep laminate maple while the top is and measures 17-inch across its widest point. The set maple neck comes loaded with a rosewood 'board that plays host to 22 medium jumbo frets. Execution is smart with well-cut and installed mother-of-pearl inlays and the same aged cream binding that outlines the body.

It wouldn't be a D'Angelico without some Art Deco sweet spots and the EXL-1 keeps it old school at the body end with its three-ply 'Scalini' scratchplate, hexagonal control knobs and the chunky yet beautiful chrome 'Stairstep' tailpiece. The headstock holds its own with an ebony veneer that provides a perfect backdrop to the mother-of-pearl 'Premier' shield, the chrome Skyscraper truss rod cover, and that little urn-like adornment that sits at the very top of the guitar. The tuners, also in chrome, are Rotomatics with the 'Stairstep' buttons.

Then there's the paint job. Making a white finish look good on a big guitar is like dealing with a limpet with abandonment issues – tough to pull off. The Gretsch White Falcon gets away with it because the whole guitar is all about rock 'n' roll excess. The glossy coat on the EXL-1 is the definition of 'pimped', too, but while that combination of white and chrome might look bitchin' on Iceberg Slim's Cadillac, it cheapens the look of this jazz guitar in our opinion. A creamier, aged vibe would work better. As it stands, we'd be more inclined to take home the Black or Wine Red finish models. Colour aside, the fact that the top nut is a little narrow to fully occupy its slot at the end of the fingerboard, is the only gripe we have.

If you want Slash tones you're out of luck, but lovers of sweet, old school jazz guitar are served well

In Use

Those hexagonal control knobs we wrote of earlier comprise the lion's share of the EXL-1's wiring loom. You get a master volume and master tone, scratchplate-mounted of course, that preside over a neck-mounted (aka floating) mini-humbucker. Tonal versatility is not an issue here. If you want to nail Slash's *Appetite*... sounds then you're out of luck, but lovers of deep, sweet, old school jazz tone are served well. The tone is matched by the easy playability of the pleasantly plump C profile neck, well-dressed frets and even the heavy 12-54 gauge strings which feature a wound third.

Okay, we really aren't too convinced by the white finish, but in just about all other respects the EXL-1 does a good job. It delivers a respectable classic jazz sound for the money, and it plays really well. Considering that original D'Angelico archtops sell for tens of thousands, the Premier Series EXL-1 is a credit to the family name.

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Great playability
+ Cool Art Deco eye candy
+ Sweet amplified jazz tone

– That white finish looks a little plasticky and cheap

Few affordable jazz boxes have the history, and cool retro touches, of a D'Angelico. Figure in the playability and tone and the EXL-1 is a winner

7/10

KEY FEATURES

D'Angelico Premier Series EXL-1

- **PRICE** £778 (with padded gigbag)
- **DESCRIPTION** Hollowbody six-string electric jazz guitar. Made in Indonesia
- **BUILD** 3" deep and 17" wide hollow archtop body with laminated spruce top and laminated maple sides, set maple neck, rosewood fingerboard with mother-of-pearl block inlays and 22 medium jumbo frets; ebony headstock veneer with mother-of-pearl 'Premier' shield and 'skyscraper' truss rod cover; dual-action truss rod
- **HARDWARE** Floating rosewood bridge, chrome D'Angelico 'Stairstep' tailpiece, chrome Rotomatic 'Stairstep' tuners, mini hexagonal control knobs
- **ELECTRICS** 1x D'Angelico floating mini-humbucker with chrome cover
- **SCALE LENGTH** 649mm/25.5"
- **NECK WIDTH** 45mm at nut, 53mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 22mm at first fret, 50mm at 12th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 35mm at nut, 54mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 3.35/7.4lbs
- **CONTROLS** Master volume, master tone
- **LEFT-HANDERS** No
- **FINISHES** Gloss White (as reviewed), Black, Wine Red
- **CONTACT** Face +32 3844 6797 **www.dangelicoguitars.com**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE... The retro-inspired **Epiphone '66 Century (£499)** has a body-mounted, neck position P-90 single coil, while **Gretsch**'s **G9555 New Yorker (£560)** offers more Big Apple-inspired vintage cool. **Godin**'s **5th Avenue Kingpin (£599)** is one of the most popular affordable archtops around, and again offers a stripped-down 50s vibe

GAIN
VOLUME
TREBLE
MIDDLE
BASS
REVERB
MASTER

Fender Mustang GT 40 & GT 100

Bluetooth. Wifi. App control. Fender amps have come a long way since the Woody models of seven decades ago. **CHRIS VINNICOMBE** revs up a pair of new Mustang GT models...

As the company responsible for the greatest and most influential amplifiers in history, it makes perfect sense that Fender should address what guitarists need to make themselves heard in 2017. Much as this writer's favourite guitar tones come from circuits designed in 1947, even the dustiest and most curmudgeonly tube hounds wouldn't have the Astrons to deny that there are times when hot glass in a pine box is just too loud and impractical to dovetail neatly with the volume limitations of modern life.

Although there's plenty of competition around these days, Fender has been in the digital practice/lifestyle amp business longer than most. Back in 2006, when YouTube and Facebook were in their infancy and smartphones weren't that smart, the Fender G-Dec ('Guitar Digital Entertainment Center') combined modelled amp tones with effects, backing tracks, drum loops and a whole lot more besides. September 2010 saw the Big F redeploy the Mustang moniker best known for its use on short-scale 60s student instruments and assign it to a range of digital amplifiers >

KEY FEATURES

Mustang GT 40

- **PRICE** £195
- **DESCRIPTION** Digital modelling amplifier. Ported closed-back combo with Bluetooth and wifi connectivity. Made in China
- **POWER** 40w (2x 20w stereo)
- **CONTROLS** Gain, volume, treble, bass, master, encoder, 3x layer buttons, FX button, save button, menu button, tap button
- **CONNECTIONS** 1/4-inch jack input, 1/8-inch stereo line-out
- **SPEAKERS** 2x 6.5" Fender Special Design
- **DIMENSIONS** 387 x 267 x 210mm
- **WEIGHT** 6.25kg/14lbs
- **CONTACT** Fender EMEA 01342 331700 **www.fender.com**

KEY FEATURES

Mustang GT 100

- **PRICE** £325
- **DESCRIPTION** Digital modelling amplifier. Open-back combo with Bluetooth and wifi connectivity. Made in China
- **POWER** 100w
- **CONTROLS** Gain, volume, treble, middle, bass, master, encoder, 3x layer buttons, FX button, save button, menu button, tap button
- **CONNECTIONS** 1/4-inch jack input, 1/4-inch stereo send/return, 1/8-inch stereo line-out
- **SPEAKERS** 1x 12" Celestion Special Design
- **DIMENSIONS** 521 x 445 x 25.4mm
- **WEIGHT** 9.97kg/22lbs

heavy on features and innovation and light on the wallet.

However, as anyone with shares in MySpace will tell you, the problem with cutting edge technology is that it ages rapidly. Earlier this year, when we found out that Fender was planning a major overhaul of its Mustang amp range, it seemed like high time. Products such as Line 6's AMPLIFi had proven that wireless control of amplifier functionality was more than just a gimmick and the stage was set for Fender to weigh in.

Whether it's connecting to your telephone, interacting with an online community of music-makers, downloading presets designed by Fender artists or your getting in touch with your own creativity, the idea behind these new Mustang GT amplifiers is that they are about making a connection. The range comprises three models, two of which we're looking at here. The GT 40 is the most compact and living room or bedroom-friendly of the trio, and it pumps 40-watts out of a pair of 6.5-inch drivers. The GT 100 takes a whole lotta tech from the home to the stage with 100 watts harnessed to a 12-inch Celestion Special Design speaker while the GT 200 doubles the power and speaker complement for a massive 200-watts of 'Stang.

The sleek enclosures bear a familial resemblance to Fender's smart-looking Acoustic amp range launched at Winter NAMM in January 2017, and as well as neatly integrated handles and recessed control panels, you get 21 newly-upgraded amp

The idea behind these new Mustang GT amplifiers is that they are designed to make a connection

models, 46 effects and a clean and easily legible colour LCD display. The connectivity options are impressive; claimed to be the world's first wifi-equipped digital guitar amps, the GTs allow you to download firmware updates and share presets wirelessly but the big news is that speedy and stable Bluetooth LE support enables you to programme the amp and edit sounds remotely and on the fly using the free Fender Tone app on your Android or iOS smartphone.

As well as sculpting your core sound or auditioning presets, the clean and easy-to-use Fender Tone app allows for deep editing of under-the-hood features that are a tweaker's delight such as bias and sag. As you might expect, classic Fender amplifiers are well-represented among the onboard models and a wide range of iconic amplifiers from the company's glittering history are modelled including a brown Deluxe, blackface Twin Reverb, tweed Champ, Bassman and plenty more besides.

The likes of Johnny Marr and Gary Clark Jr have contributed artist presets, while a host of amp models inspired by amplifiers from outside of the Fender stable keep your virtual collection well rounded, from the distinctly Marshall-y '70s British' model to more esoteric selections. Effects can be placed pre or post in the virtual chain and they range from retro recreations to more modern ambient effects such as shimmer.

As if all that wasn't enough to get to grips with, you can also stream your favourite music for the purposes of listening or jamming along while the optional MGT-4 four-button footswitch enables 60-seconds of looping functionality. There's also support for 'setlists' and effects trails spill over when you switch between presets for less jarring transitions.

In Use

It's remarkable how quickly you get to grips with using the Fender Tone app. In a home practice scenario it's hugely satisfying to make sweeping adjustments from the comfort of the sofa. It's not that the labour-saving aspect appeals to our indolence, there's just less faff to get in the way of making music when you don't have to get up and fiddle with onboard controls every few minutes.

The GT 100 will take you from the bedroom to the stage, but the GT 40 is likely to be more living room friendly

Most of us are time-poor these days, and it's quicker and more intuitive to flick through presets using an iPhone from the other side of the room. That's not to say that the experience that the Mustang GT amps offer is superficial: if you want to adjust the bias of the '57 Champ model that you are running into a virtual 4x12 then you can do that too. It's as shallow or deep as you need it to be.

If we were to A/B test the various models available here against their real-life equivalents then the perceived 'realism' of the Mustang's tones would no doubt be variable, but that's hardly the point – there are more than enough high-quality amp voices and effects here to keep us interested for a long time to come. For our money, the blackface models provide the most organic tones and response. Emulating the more harmonically complex tweeds seems to have presented a tougher challenge for the tech.

It's interesting to note that to a man, the members of the G&B team gravitated to the GT 40. If you're a player who already owns one or more high-quality valve amplifiers then it's the obvious choice; as a device into which to stream audio, jam along or just noodle away unaccompanied, it's easy to imagine the GT 40 on a shelf in your living room or home office. It'll make you play more guitar.

The 100 is undoubtedly a much punchier affair, but it feels more like a feature-packed first gigging amp than a game-changing lifestyle product. That's not to say there's no market for the 100 or even the GT 200's massive 2x 100-watt stereo spread, quite the opposite. From tech-savvy fledglings to experienced players who crave a versatile and portable backline, we foresee thousands of happy customers.

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

Mustang GT 40

+ Compact and affordable
+ Bristling with features

– Tone shaping via Bluetooth
– Some overdriven tones a little fizzy

For the price, it's hard to fault. A cool and compact home amp that'll make you play more regularly

9/10

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

Mustang GT 100

+ Huge versatility
+ Easy control and adjustment
+ 12-inch speaker helps models come to life

– Unlikely to be as transformative day-to-day as the GT 40

The range of tones and functionality make this an enviable first gigging amp

8/10

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Line 6's AMPLIFi comes in several different incarnations and power ratings. The **AMPLIFi 30 (£209)** is a great starting point – trying using it with one of the company's Relay wireless units for the ultimate cable-free home setup. **Blackstar**'s **ID:Core BEAM (£229)** is a toneful desktop amp with Bluetooth. Also check out **Yamaha's** various **THR** models, which range from lunchbox units to gigging amps

MASTER
REVERB
HI
MID
LOW
VOL
PRESET SELECT/STORE
GAIN
CHANNEL SELECTOR

Stone Deaf SD30 combo

An all-valve combo with tone-tweaking options worthy of a modelling amp? **RICHARD PURVIS** sees the multicoloured light...

Guitar & Bass AWARD CHOICE 9/10

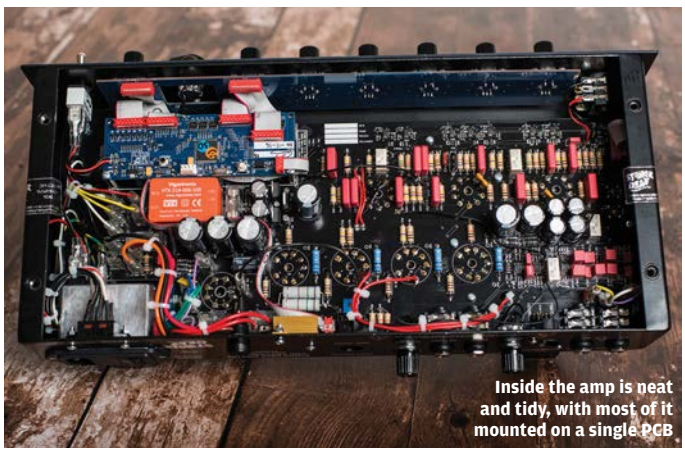
As any drummer will tell you, Hegelian dialectic involves fusing an existing theory with its antithesis in order to establish a new paradigm. Well, the designers at Stone Deaf must be big fans of German idealist philosophy, because their amplifiers are about as Hegelian as they come.

The general theory is that amps should be all-valve and all-analogue; but modern digital technology is better for flexibility – so is there a third way? Well Stone Deaf says that you can just as easily smash those two ideas together, and the result is the SD30 Combo.

Stone Deaf is a small operation with workshops in Oldham and Huddersfield, and we were seriously impressed by their latest stompbox, the Tremotron – a dual tremolo with a fully analogue signal path and ultra-twiddle-friendly digital control. The SD30 works on the same principles: it's a proper all-valve amp, powered by four EL84s and with a real spring reverb tank at the bottom; but instead of being controlled by a line of potentiometers and maybe a switch or two, its analogue tones are manipulated digitally – either by the knobs and switches on the top panel, or remotely via MIDI.

The key word here – one that you'll never hear mentioned in relation to a normal tube amp – is 'presets'. The SD30 can store up to 128 of them; and while you shouldn't expect the kind of circuit-swapping versatility of a modelling amp, it is closer to that degree of control than you might think. As well as the usual gain, EQ and reverb settings, presets can include some of the geek-level details that modellers often try to emulate: valve or solid-state rectification, fixed or cathode bias, and Class AB (30 Watts) or Class A (8 Watts). And let's just reiterate – this isn't emulation. It's controlling the flow of electrons through actual, glowing valves.

There's also an effects loop that can be engaged or bypassed as part of each preset, and you don't need MIDI to explore all this capability: you can toggle through presets, and save new ones, by pushing in the knobs on the top panel and watching the lights change colour accordingly (the gain control works as a clean/dirty channel selector in the same way). Adjustments can easily be stored to new presets, but you will need some sort of MIDI device with a five-pin output to change anything remotely – ideally a multi-switch foot controller, though even a cheap keyboard will be able to help out if you know how to programme its data functions. >


Inside the amp is neat and tidy, with most of it mounted on a single PCB

KEY FEATURES

Stone Deaf SD30 combo

- **PRICE** £1,749
- **DESCRIPTION** Digitally controlled 1x12 valve combo with reverb. Made in the UK
- **POWER RATING** 30W
- **VALVES** 3x 12AX7, 4x EL84, 1x GZ34
- **CONTROL PANEL** Standby switch; rotary push-switch for FX loop bypass, valve or solid-state rectification, fixed or cathode bias, 30W Class AB or 8W Class A; master volume, reverb, treble, mids, bass (press for preset down), channel volume (press for preset up), gain (press for channel selector); guitar input
- **BOTTOM PANEL** Power switch, 5-pin MIDI input, FX loop send and return with level controls, balanced line out, 4-ohm and 8-ohm speaker outputs
- **SPEAKER** 1x custom-built Fane FX70
- **DIMENSIONS** 575 x 510 x 265mm
- **WEIGHT** 21.4kg/47.2lbs
- **CONTACT**
  Stone Deaf Effects & Amplification
  01706 882486
  stonedeaffx.com

The SD30 aims to bridge the gap between digital and valve amplifier technology

Many of the components are sourced from the UK, including the transformers

Having the ability to save and recall a wide variety of presets using a real valve amplifier is a rare treat

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...
Other valve combos with a certain degree of MIDI capability include the **Marshall JVM410C (£1,489)** and **Mesa/Boogie Mark V (£3,235)**. The **Hughes & Kettner TriAmp Mk 3** head **(£2,599)** comes with a seven-switch MIDI foot controller and allows you to hop between different output valves

Hold on, though – we're getting hypnotised by all this high-tech sorcery and forgetting the most important part: the amplifier itself. It's a serious lump of backline, and still would be even if they'd forgotten to put all the digital stuff in.

So, first and foremost it's a 30-watt 1x12 combo with three 12AX7s, four EL84s and a GZ34 rectifier. Components have been sourced from the UK wherever possible, and a couple of the key ones haven't had far to travel at all: the speaker is a custom-voiced Fane, made just down the M62 in Castleford, and the transformers are supplied by Huddersfield's Pennine Radio. Poplar has been used in the cabinetry to keep the weight reasonable; and though there's not much to report from inside except that almost everything is attached to one huge PCB, it is an exceptionally tidy build.

What else is there to play around with? You've got three EQ controls, which have been designed not to be interactive at all, giving fully independent control over the different frequency ranges; and there's a balanced DI output, which is raw and unequalised for re-amping.

In Use

How do you navigate 128 presets on a gadget without a screen? Following colour-coded lights isn't quite as simple as scrolling through a list of named sounds, so we might just leave that side of things until we've got our sonic bearings. Finding a basic clean tone is easy enough, and the usual tweaks are really no different to how they'd be on a traditional amp.

And that basic clean tone is good. Four EL84s, cathode biasing, valve rectification, no negative feedback loop... remind you of anything? It is indeed pretty Voxy – rich, sparkly and spacious, compressing sweetly when pushed – but with a more solid midrange that takes us some way in the direction of Orange. With channel volume at full, turning the master control past halfway only really adds saturation and compression, but it's plenty loud below that. You're not going to struggle for stage volume.

Switching to Class A makes things a lot cleaner as well as quieter, while selecting fixed bias has a distinct stiffening effect – say goodbye to AC30-like sponginess and low-end bloom. As for the rectifier switch, it's the least dramatic of these three circuit mods, and we wonder if switchable negative feedback might have been a more useful option.

The solid-state rectifier does open up a teeny bit more headroom with high-gain sounds – and my, what fine high-gain sounds they are. This is big, tight, classic EL84 overdrive, and we could happily thrash away at it all afternoon. The separate volume dials allow plenty of control over the gain structure, and maxing out the high and low EQ with mids fully down, high-output humbuckers can deliver some massive metal tones. The reverb is lovely, though on our review amp a hint of it would sometimes leak out when bypassed.

So what's it like to skip your way through all these sounds via MIDI? Much depends on the hardware you're using, but having the ability to save and recall so many preset tones is a rare treat – especially with a real valve amplifier of so many voices. A lot of players will undoubtedly prefer the more intuitive feel of a less ambitious amp with two or three channels and maybe reverb; but if you need lots of different tones, you're happy working with MIDI, and you like to see your equipment light up like a fairground, this could be your dream Brit combo.

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Rich overdriven tones with classic British bark
+ An all-you-can-tweak buffet of fine-tuning options...
+ You can save every variable into your presets

- It's a complicated beast – and you'll need a suitable MIDI device for remote switching

This is a great-sounding EL84 combo, whether or not you're ready for its futuristic functionality

9/10

John Adams

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TREBLE
PRESENCE
MASTER
LEVEL
LEVEL

Positive Grid Bias Head

It's a real amp, but it contains loads of virtual ones that you can edit and replace with modelled amps of your own. **RICHARD PURVIS** tries to figure out what that all means...

Digital modelling amps are over two decades old now, and the progress made in both software and hardware is huge... we're only a few steps away from amps that set themselves up at a gig and give you a lift home afterwards.

Positive Grid comes into this from the software angle and the Bias Head represents its first step into stuff with actual knobs. Understandably, software remains a key part of this product. While the Bias Head comes with 25 amp models onboard, you also get a code to download Bias Amp – an AmpliTube-style app (desktop or iOS) that lets you try out a vast number of different models (many of which are user-created) and customise your tone in ultra-nerdy detail before loading it up into the amp via Bluetooth or USB.

Those ultra-nerdy details include switching valve types, tonestacks and even transformers, as well as more familiar adjustments to speaker cabs and placement of the virtual mic. But we're here for the amp, so let's dive in.

Does 314mm qualify as 'lunchbox'? It's certainly not much heavier than two tuna sandwiches and a Fruit Shoot, yet still produces 600 watts of Class D power. The 25 amp models are divided into five broad types – clean, glassy, blues, crunch and metal – with five amps available for each. The two rows of controls offer tons of room for customisation within each model: you can change the number of preamp valve stages and even the topology of the output stage, then there are three separate gain controls, a three-way tone stack (plus presence) and switches for bright/normal and vintage/modern voicing... and yes, all of this is on the front of the amp itself.

There's also an adjustable noise gate, and a switch for speaker cab simulation – which brings us nicely to the equally busy rear panel. The single speaker output is happy running into anything from four to 16 ohms, and there are also balanced and unbalanced DI outs plus an effects loop. You can plug in a standard footswitch for hopping between any two sounds of your choice (after a somewhat fiddly set-up procedure), but for anything more complex you'll need a suitable MIDI switch.

In Use

For some reason, the default cab simulator for the DI outputs is also applied here, which is seems a little silly – why would you want to pump a fake cab into a real one? This is easily switched off on the rear panel, but our review amp's other snag is a rather high noise floor (thankfully not shared by the headphone and DI outputs) that isn't so easily cured.

Luckily, the sounds themselves are really good – there's a nice range of tones in each of the five sets of models, all of them distinctive – from super-clean blackface chime, to mid-heavy Vox crunch, to fizzing Mesa hellfire. The amount of tweakability on offer from the controls is almost scary, and improvements are easily stored by pressing the save button.

There's no audible latency and the cleaner models can get very close to the real amps they're emulating, either through a real cab or DI'd to an audio interface, but it's with the heavier stuff that the Bias Head really comes alive, helped by a noise gate that does its job very smartly.

The software is nicely laid out and highly intuitive, with a depth of editing that's surely as much as any semi-reasonable person could want. It also includes a clever Amp Match mode that can copy the profile of any physical amp that you hook it up to.

It's a bit superfluous, however and given the flexibility the Bias package offers anyway, who really needs it? A few onboard effects, or perhaps a really solid five-way footswitch, would have really tipped this into indispensable territory.

Guitar VERDICT

+ Handy package with good DI sounds
+ Metal models are particularly good
+ Easy deep-level editing

- No built-in effects
- It's arguably more than what many of us need for basic gigging

It has its limitations, but if you're a high-gain fiend this could be your dream amp collection in one box

8/10

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

The obvious rival here is the **Kemper Profiler Head (£1,699)**; but for a cheaper introduction to virtual amps living inside real heads, try the **Line 6 Spider V 240 HC (£426)** or **Marshall CODE 100 (£329)**

KEY FEATURES

Positive Grid Bias Head

- **POWER RATING** 600W
- **FRONT PANEL** Rotary switches for mode (clean, glassy, blues, crunch, metal) and model (1-5), save button; switch for preamp tube stages (1-5), bright/normal switch, preamp distortion control; power amp topology switch (single-ended, split load, push-pull, solid state) and output control; 'custom' control (defaults to noise gate threshold) and cab simulator bypass switch; guitar input; gain, bass, middle, treble, presence, master and output controls, modern/vintage switch
- **REAR PANEL** 4-16-ohm speaker output, left and right balanced and unbalanced line-outs with ground lift switch, headphone output, FX loop send and return with ground lift switch; MIDI out, thru and in, two 1/4" footswitch inputs (standard and I2C), USB input, speaker output serial/parallel switch and footswitch calibration switch, power switch, three-pin power input with variable mains voltage (100-240V)
- **DIMENSIONS** 314 x 190 x 153mm
- **WEIGHT** 7.7kg/17lbs
- **CONTACT** Face +32 3844 6797 **positivegrid.com**

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Echopark F-2 Dual Stage Fuzz

This artfully minimalistic unit wants to take us back to the birth of fuzz – **RICHARD PURVIS** sets the dials for the heart of retro raucousness

If you don't think this pedal looks cool, you might want to get your eyes tested. A chunk of battlefield green-painted steel with two giant knobs, and no further ornamentation beyond the maker's name on a metal plate – it's the sort of thing you could imagine finding at the back of a cupboard in Abbey Road.

So, this is another boutique fuzz? Well, yes, but while the market is chock full of smooth, buttery fuzzes, this has no interest in butteriness – in fact it's probably lactose-intolerant. Inspired by the very first 60s fuzzes, this one's all about snarl.

The 'Dual' part is due to two separate transistors – both silicon – creating two different flavours of fuzz that are blended together within the circuit. But it's a bit more complex than that. With the blend knob shy of 12 o'clock, the two fuzzes operate in parallel; beyond there, the first is being pushed into the second for a richer, heavier distortion. There's also a toggle switch for boost.

Echopark is better known for guitars, but this is immaculately hand-wired, using what we're told are rigorously tested high-quality components – though we'll never know that for sure, as most of them have been encased in black gloop to deter the cloners. If you appreciate attention to detail, note that even the screw heads on the baseplate have been painted to match the enclosure.

In Use

When it comes to 60s fuzz, all roads lead back to Keef and a Maestro Fuzz-Tone. With that in mind, the first thing we try is the *...Satisfaction* riff. The original was famously Keef's attempt to emulate a horn section as a guide track, so we're expecting something pert and brassy here – and that's just what the F-2 delivers.

There's not much sustain on the left side of the blend control, and without boost, separation between the two fuzzes – one thumpy, one fizzy – is quite disconcerting and not necessarily likeable. But flicking the toggle switch brings the sound together, and it's a lo-fi delight. Single notes can sound almost conventionally fuzzy, albeit more mid-focused than usual, but hit an open chord and you'll run smack into a wall of joyously jarring harmonics.

Pushing the blend dial into cascading mode makes things more gainy, with compression that can sag at times, and also tightens up the maelstrom into something a little more manageable. This pedal really is all about the 'ripping cardboard' midrange – yet it's never harsh on the ears, because the treble response remains surprisingly sweet.

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE... Another way to avoid dropping £500+ on an original Maestro Fuzz-Tone is the **Reuss Vintage Three Volt Fuzz ($155)**, a modern interpretation of the old wonder-wedge using three germanium transistors. There's also the **British Pedal Co WEM Pep Box (£269)**, a replica of Charlie Watkins' answer to the Maestro

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Wonderfully impolite retro fuzz tones
+ More versatile than it first appears
+ It's a beautifully made unit
- The two fuzz sounds don't always sit well together
- It's quite a lot of cash for a two-knob fuzzbox

It spits, it gurgles, it roars – this is proper vintage fuzz with none of the edges smoothed off

8/10

KEY FEATURES

Echopark F-2 Dual Stage Fuzz

- **PRICE** £249
- **DESCRIPTION** Fuzz pedal. Made in USA
- **CONTROLS** Level, blend, boost switch; bypass footswitch
- **FEATURES** True bypass, powered by 9V mains supply or battery (not supplied)
- **DIMENSIONS** 123 x 91 x 56mm
- **CONTACT** Coda Music 01438 350 815 **coda-music.com** **echoparkinstruments.com**

Nine bright red LEDs tell us that the FreqOut is on, and illuminate corresponding to the onset rate of feedback

The Dry switch determines whether the dry signal can be heard or not. Turn it off for EBow-like swells

Gain & onset knobs control the ratio of feedback to dry signal and the time that elapses before the onset of the feedback

The Type dial gives you seven types of harmonic feedback, at a sub-octave, 1st, 2nd, 3rd or 5th harmonic, plus 'natural' low and high sounds

DigiTech FreqOut

This feedback generator has already been getting lots of good... er, feedback, online. But is **RICHARD PURVIS** hitting the right notes?

Look at those fools, hiding from their amps, turning down the gain, stuffing their hollowbodies with old pants – anything to escape from the dreaded feedback. Don't they know it's a gift from the gods of rock?

You may not agree if you're playing jazz or Beyonce covers, but letting the guitar play itself a little can be fun, and sometimes inspiring. It isn't as easy to do as it used to be, though – nice feedback requires the amp to be turned up high, especially if you're using a solidbody, and live engineers and local authorities really aren't keen on that these days. So how about a little stompbox to bring out those harmonic howls even at low volumes, not only on stage but also at home and in the studio?

This is the premise of the FreqOut, a 'natural feedback creator' for the attenuated age. It identifies the harmonic content of the note or chord you're playing and, in DigiTech's words, 'encourages user-selectable harmonics to feed back'. So the key control is the rotary 'type' switch, which lets you choose which harmonic to bring out based on the strongest note the pedal hears: sub (an octave below), 1st order (the note itself), 2nd (an octave above), 3rd (the fifth above that), 5th (the major third above that), then 'natural low' and 'natural high', which don't worry about the rules too much.

Above that are concentric dials to control how loud the feedback gets and how quickly it fades in, while in the middle are two toggle switches: one to select 'momentary' mode, so it'll stop when you lift off your foot, and one to kill the dry signal. The LEDs light up as the effect swells.

Hold an open E major chord and natural-sounding feedback oozes smoothly into the picture

In Use

As we're awkward we'll start with a recipe for feedback-dodging purity: a Telecaster into a clean amp so quiet it's barely on. Well, it doesn't take long to realise that this thing really works. Turn it on, hold an open E major, and an entirely natural-sounding note of feedback oozes smoothly into the chord.

All the different harmonic types work well, and you can liven up the effect with vibrato and string-bends just like 'normal' feedback. The only thing that sounds unnaturally digital is the way it tracks your left hand with fretless-like glissando... but you can work around this, or exploit it by switching off the dry signal for an almost Theremin-like effect.

Next we try to freak out the FreqOut by bringing some unassisted feedback into the mix – a Gibson ES-330 into a cooking Marshall should do the trick? There's a huge difference in vibe with the real thing: you can coax the notes out, feel them rumbling through the body of the guitar, ride them as they come back at you, fade one into another... and no, of course a stompbox can't do all that. But it can work with the guitar-born feedback to create some surprising intervals (a major third added to a fifth makes a major seventh), and the timbre of the pedal's contributions to this wailing concerto never sounds false.

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Natural, musical feedback in a box
+ Can also create quirky synth sounds
+ Controls have been well thought-out for maximum versatility

– Lacks the two-way responsiveness of 'real' feedback

There's no substitute for standing in front of a cranked amp and going a bit mad, but this gets pretty close

8/10

KEY FEATURES

DigiTech FreqOut

- **PRICE** £149
- **DESCRIPTION** Natural feedback creator pedal, made in China
- **CONTROLS** Feedback gain, onset speed and harmonic type; momentary/latching switch, dry signal on/off switch
- **FEATURES** True bypass (buffered when in momentary mode), powered by 9V mains supply only (not supplied)
- **DIMENSIONS** 123 x 74 x 45mm
- **CONTACT** Sound Technology 01462 480000
  www.soundtech.co.uk
  www.digitech.com

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

The **Vibesware GR-1 (€299)** does something similar to the FreqOut using a gooseneck mic, and there's a **Junior** version for **(€159)**. You might get close to at least some of these sounds with an **Electro-Harmonix Pitch Fork (£148)** or **Boss PS-6 Harmonist (£129)**

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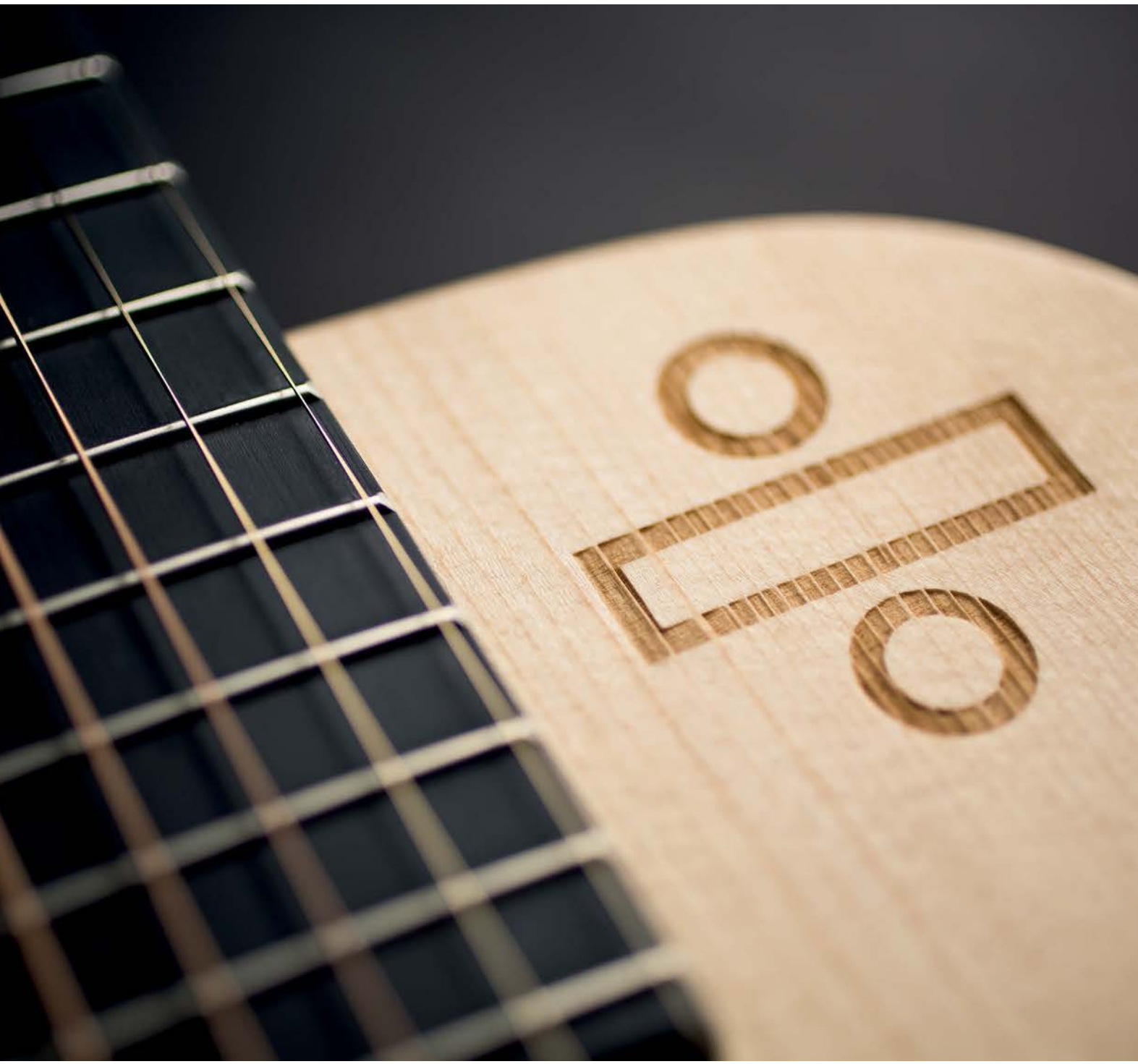

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*guitar pictured - Ed Sheeran 3 LX Signature Edition

House Of Tone Heavy House P-94 set

Things are going to get heavy with this new P-94 set. **HUW PRICE** enters House Of Tone's house of fun...

Guitar & Bass AWARD CHOICE 9/10

It's always struck us as odd that so many beautiful 1950s Les Pauls are lost to 'Burst conversions. Leaving aside the aesthetics, much of the impetus seems to stem from the notion that PAFs are 'better' than P-90s. Even when comparing vintage originals, the point is moot because we find them every bit as good as each other with plenty of common ground sonically.

Having said that, there's a world of difference between authentic vintage P-90 tone and most modern humbuckers – including some wannabe PAF replicas. So if you're stuck with a muddy and aggressive-sounding Les Paul or some such and feel like you might prefer something a bit more old school, dynamic and clear, then P-90s might be just the ticket for you.

Inconveniently, P-90s won't fit into humbucker holes, so a number of manufacturers now offer P-90s in PAF clothing for drop-in replacement. Many are more like demi-PAFs than bona fide P-90s, with coils that are too tall and narrow to sound like the real thing. Fortunately the tide has been turning and the House Of Tone Heavy House P-94 set is made with authenticity as a paramount concern.

The P-94s are based on mid-50s Gibson P-90s, and this set is fitted with alnico V bar magnets, but all grades of alnico are available to customers upon request. Similarly, although these have been lightly wax-potted, they can be ordered unpotted if that's your poison.

To fit the requisite P-94 bits inside open-topped PAF covers, House Of Tone has opted for fibreboard flats rather than plastic. It's a thicker material, which means that the coils end up a few millimetres further away from the strings. Easy to solder Polysol insulated magnet wire is used rather than plain enamel but it apparently sounds indistinguishable because both coatings have the same thickness.

Since many of us mix and match pickups, House Of Tone supplies these with three-conductor wires: black, white and yellow so you can flip the pickup's polarity by reversing the yellow and white wires, with black always connected to ground.

In Use

Do the Heavy House P94 pickups genuinely sound like P-90s? If we were to get really picky, we might say the P-94 set is not quite as pure and pretty sounding as the original 1961 Gibson P-90 pickups we use for comparison, but there's very little in it. The P-94s definitely have more of a pissed-off growl, but some of that could be attributed to the solidbody construction of the Les Paul test guitar versus our vintage ES-330 hollowbody.

The P-94s are extremely sensitive, dynamically responsive and hang on to notes for eons. Playing clean, you get wiry quack off the back pickup contrasting with a full-fat creaminess from the neck. Ramp up the gain and the countrified jazziness morphs into a harmonically loaded 'brrrang' with bridge pickup powerchords and rounded vocal-tinged single notes from the neck unit.

If you fancy dropping mid-50s tone straight into a humbucker-loaded guitar, the Heavy House set will do the job as well as any, but better than most. More award winners from Chester's finest pickup guru.

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE... **Bare Knuckle**'s **Mississippi Queen** set **(£179)** features 42AWG plain enamel wire and alnico V magnets under closed metal covers. The **Creamery Hum-90** set **(£160)** can be ordered with alnico II, IV or V magnets and is wound with 43AWG wire. **Mojo's PAF-sized P-90** sets **(£140)** can be ordered with open and closed covers

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Undeniably P-90-like tone
+ Very touch-sensitive
+ Switchable polarity

- Open top looks may not appeal
- Polepieces are offset from true P-90 positions

Some players may prefer full covers, but the P-90 tone is all there

9/10

KEY FEATURES

House Of Tone Heavy House P-94 Set

- **PRICE** £140
- **DESCRIPTION** Hand-wound vintage P-90-style pickups in PAF mount casings. Made in the UK
- **SPECS** 42 AWG Polysol magnet wire, alnico V magnets, vulcanized fibreboard flat work, lightly wax-potted
- **CONTACT** House Of Tone Pickups 07791 691251 **www.houseoftonepickups.co.uk**

SOUND ADVICE

We all use the terms without thinking, but TONY BACON has to ask – what do guitarists actually mean when we're talking tone?

TONY BACON

Tony Bacon is an author and journalist who writes about musical instruments, musicians, and music. More info at tonybacon.co.uk. His books include *The Ultimate Guitar Book*, *The Gibson 335 Guitar Book*, and *The Ibanez Electric Guitar Book*, and his latest is *The Bass Book* (Backbeat), which tells the story of the electric bass guitar

That new guitar, it sounds sort of green, with purple round the edges, don't you think? And that old Strat really does have an airy kind of shimmer at times – but it's got to be a vintage Les Paul when you want thick and crunchy, you know? Yes, today we're talking about how we talk about sound and tone.

We all have our favourite words to describe what we hear – punch, warmth, sparkle, bite, and so on – that, when it comes down to it, actually mean nothing and everything. Which is a large part of their value. I once asked Jeff Beck about the sound of a Telecaster. Students of the Beckonian instrumental timeline will know the facts, but just in case, here's a quick primer: he briefly adopted the band's red Tele (as played by the outgoing Mr E Clapton) when he joined The Yardbirds in 1965, quickly replacing it with a circa 1960 rosewood-board Tele and a '54 Esquire; the Les Pauls and Strats came later. So, Jeff, you obviously liked Teles back then! How would you describe the Tele's sound and tone, compared to, say, the Strats you got to love later? "It's a lot creamier," he told me. "I always thought the Tele had a creamy sound. We used to describe it... Jimmy Page used to make it sound anything but creamy, but if you play it through a reasonable amp, take a little bit of the tone off on the guitar, it really sounds great. A magical, ethereal, creamy sound that the Strat doesn't have. The Strat is just brutal, a very wiry sound."

So you're in good company when you use these words. Beck called the Tele creamy, magical, ethereal and the Strat brutal, wiry. That's one of big advantages of being an artist rather than a technician: you're not so bound by accurate terminology. The artistic Humpty Dumpty in *Alice Through The Looking Glass* said: "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less."

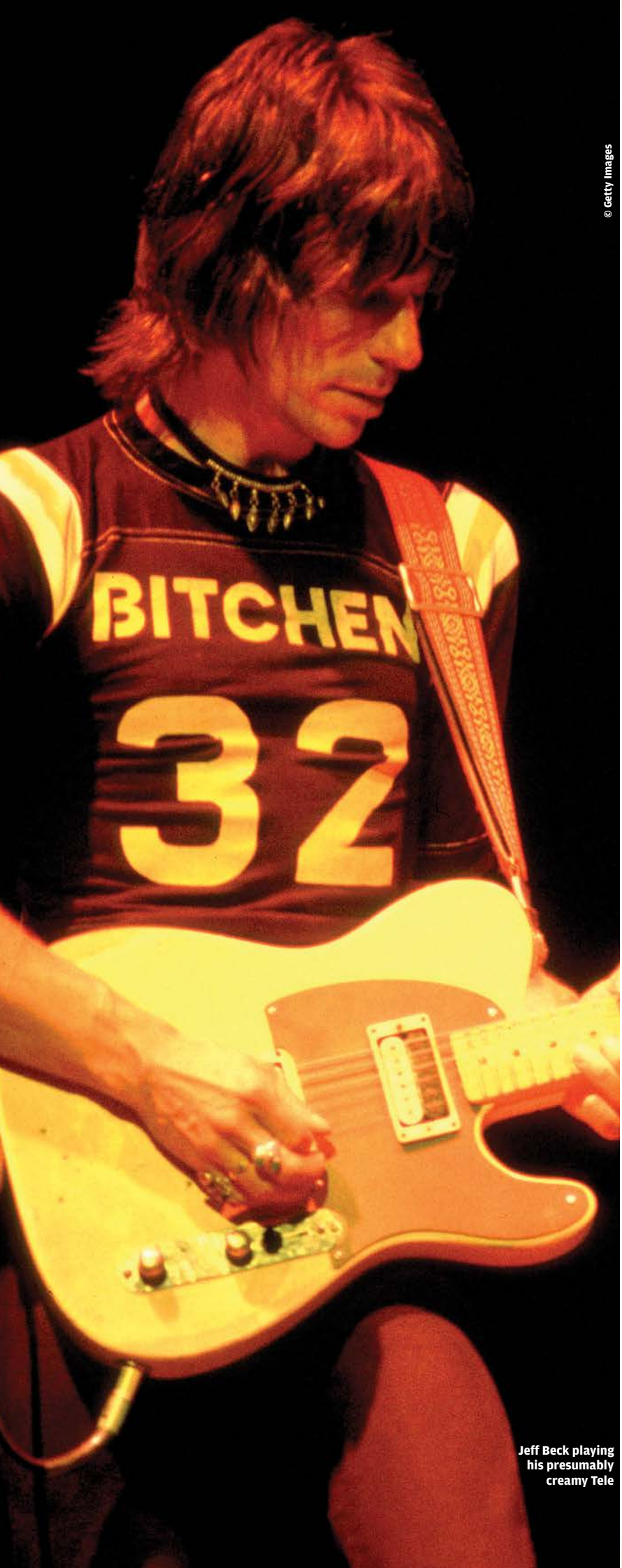
When you play guitar, you're both an artist and a technician. It's one of the great things about our instrument: you could say art and science come together every time you pick up your guitar.

Let's get away from theory and back with Mr Beck. I probed further about the Tele line in his family tree. I ran my finger down this virtual document to 1973, where I see he exchanged his Yardbirds Esquire for something with a different tone. "Seymour Duncan swapped me for a custom Seymour with Gibson humbuckers on it," Jeff explained. "It takes the thin whine out of the Tele, but it's not really what you want. It's for people who don't really want a Les Paul – the weight of it, too bulky – but the feel of a Tele and just this big fat sound of the humbuckers. It's a really good combination... just doesn't look that great."

There you are: a couple more to add to our growing lexicon of tone: whine versus fat. And all in one guitar. Seymour had put together the Tele-Gib from a '59 Tele body, a '63/'64 neck, and a pair of humbuckers from a Flying V. Meanwhile, Fender's Custom Shop launched a nitpicking replica of the swapped Esquire in 2006, calling it the Jeff Beck Tribute Esquire. Jeff chuckled about the idea. "I've got one here," he said.

"Brand spanking new. I opened the box and I thought: they're having a laugh. They've sent my guitar back! Every dig, every scratch, every little bit of ink stain. I wrote something on it and it sunk in: they've done that. Quite amusing. So I've got the repro and someone else has got the real thing. They've even got it accurate to the point where the treble control doesn't work ... because it didn't work on mine. Either that, or they didn't hook it up. One of the two."

As for the guitar that he swapped it for, the Tele-Gib, one of its finest moments came when Jeff played it on *Cause We've Ended As Lovers* for *Blow By Blow*. And I dare you to try and describe that sound.



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Jeff Beck playing his presumably creamy Tele

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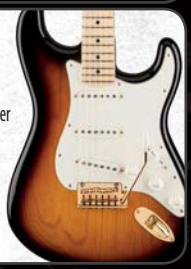

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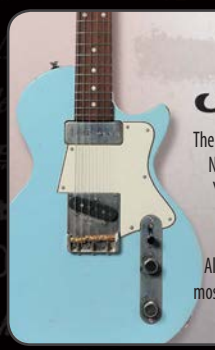

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Vintage TIME MACHINES

'57 RICKENBACKER COMBO 850

This early Ricky flagship is an extremely rare window into the rapidly evolving golden age of electric guitar

Rickenbacker collectors tend to be a devoted bunch, and it's not uncommon to see entire vintage collections made up solely of guitars from the iconic California brand. Such is the case for the London-based GG's Vintage Rickenbackers shop on Reverb. GG is currently selling a crop of rare and collectable Rics, and this 1957 Combo 850 lands at the very top of the heap.

The Combo 850 is one of the most sought-after vintage Rickys of all time. It was part of a series of 50s instruments that are precursors to the famous 325, but they lack the more elaborate ornamentation and hardware components found on the more recognisable 60s models.

On its introduction in 1957, the 850 was the flagship Rickenbacker model, intended to compete like the Stratocaster and Les Paul. According to Richard R Smith in *The History of Rickenbacker Guitars*, it was introduced along with the 650, and the pair were the first Rickenbackers to feature a deeper cutaway marketed as the "extreme cutaway body." Most were built with a glued-in neck, but some use the through-neck seen on later Rics.

The earliest Combo 850s only had one pickup, but more collectable specimens like this one host both a horseshoe-covered pickup at the bridge and a toaster top at the 'board. Other features include a rosewood fretboard, gold pickguard, and an early example of the notorious double truss rod.

This particular guitar is in excellent shape and showcases a lovely flame on the back of the maple neck. The gentle slope along the body edge was done with the same "German carve" approach seen on later models, such as the 381.

The Combo 850 represents the pinnacle of the early wave of Rickenbacker production

Overall, the Combo 850 represents the pinnacle of the early wave of Rickenbacker production, when innovators like Roger Rossmeisl (of later Fender fame) were experimenting and iterating on their designs before arriving at the forms that most contemporary players now associate with the brand. While the 850 enjoys a reputation for build quality and tone among collectors, it was only built for a short window, and examples remain extremely rare. Rickenbacker has never reissued this model, and the combination of scarcity and esteem make originals very valuable instruments.

IN ASSOCIATION WITH Reverb

VITAL STATISTICS

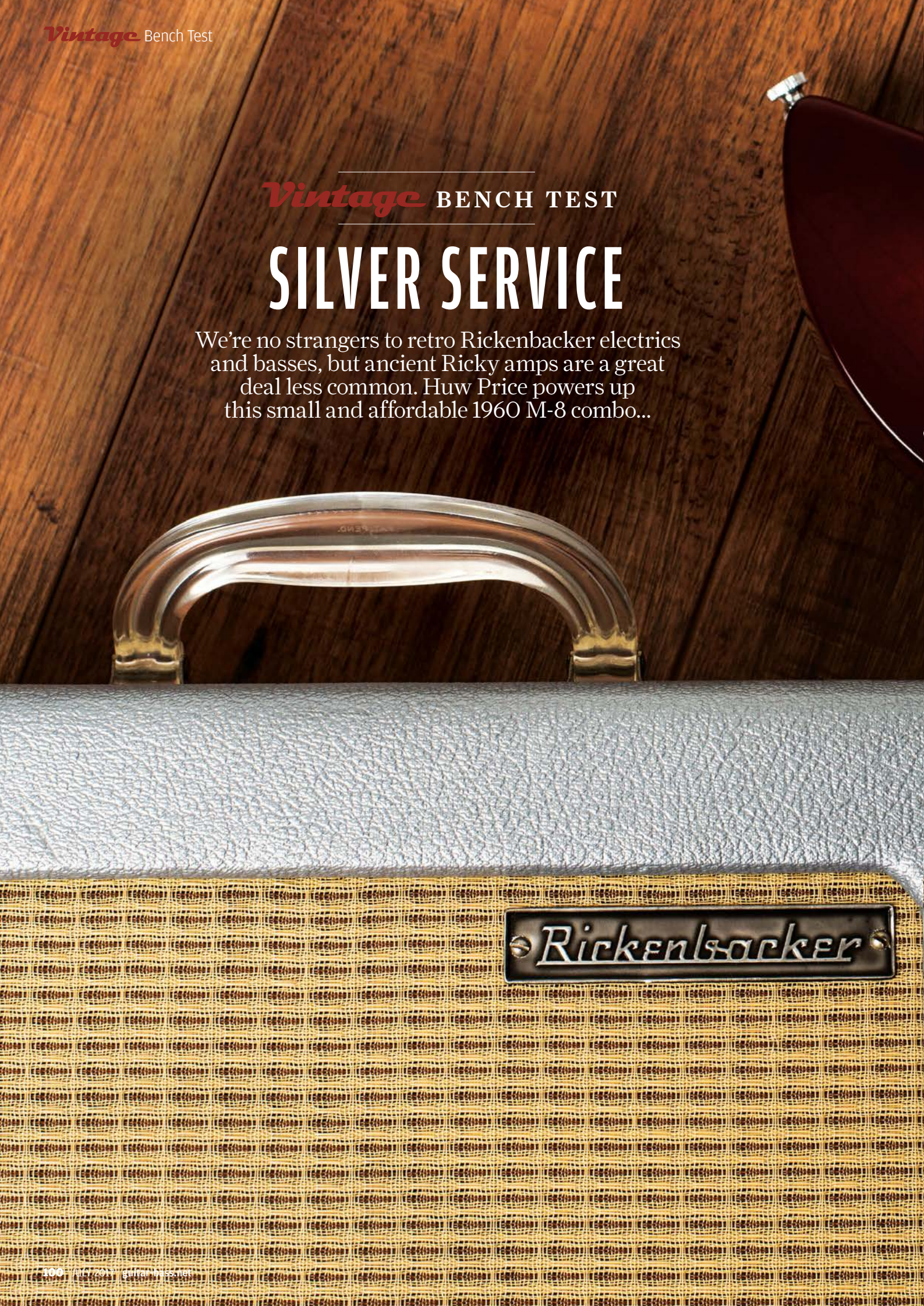
1957 Rickenbacker Combo 850 Maplegio

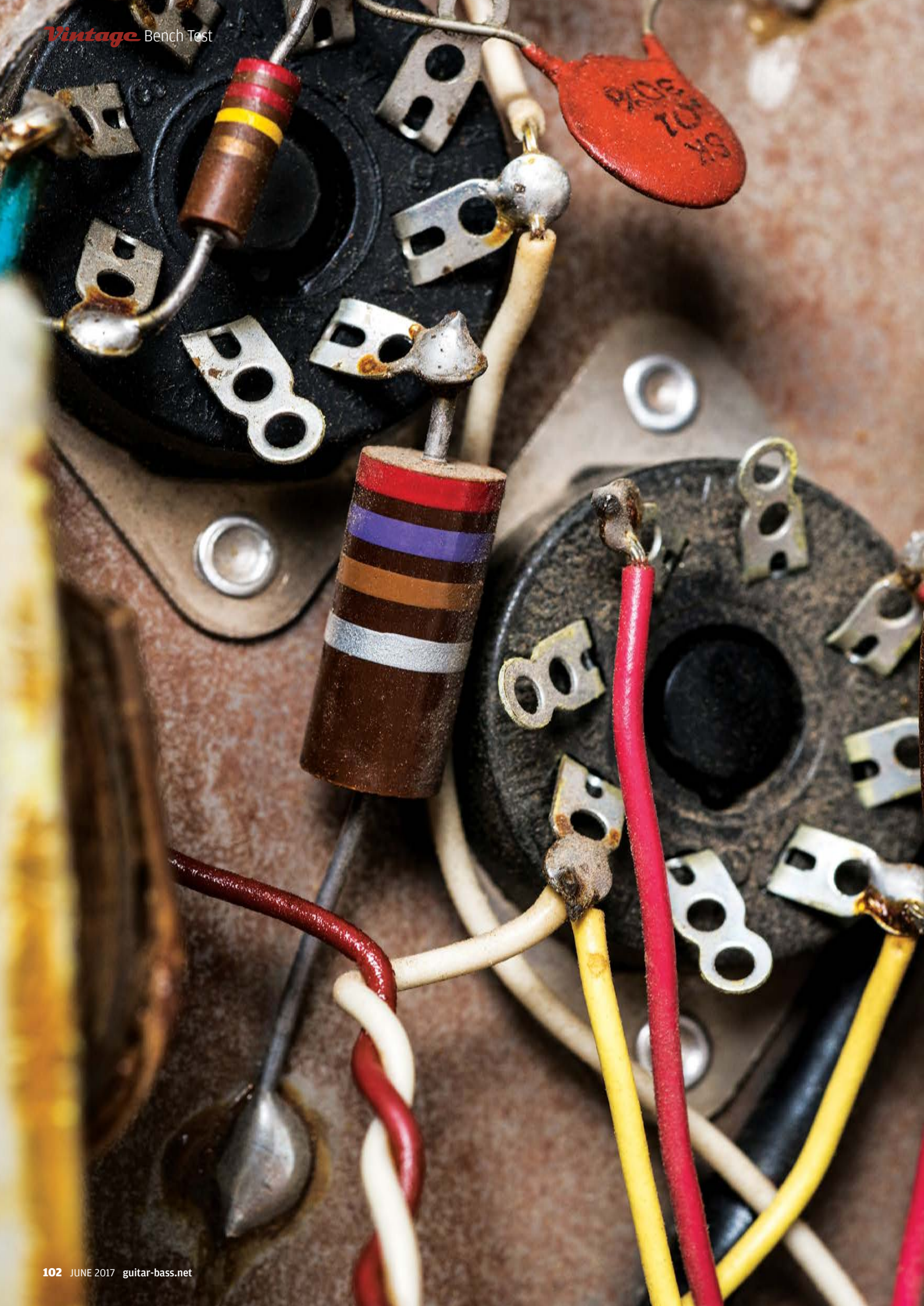
- **PRICE GUIDE** £13,295
- **YEAR** 1957
- **MANUFACTURER** Rickenbacker
- **REVERB SELLER** GG's Vintage Rickenbackers **reverb.com/shop/ggs-vintage-rickenbackers**
- **SEE MORE** **reverb.com/item/4373179-rickenbacker-combo-850-1957-maplegio**

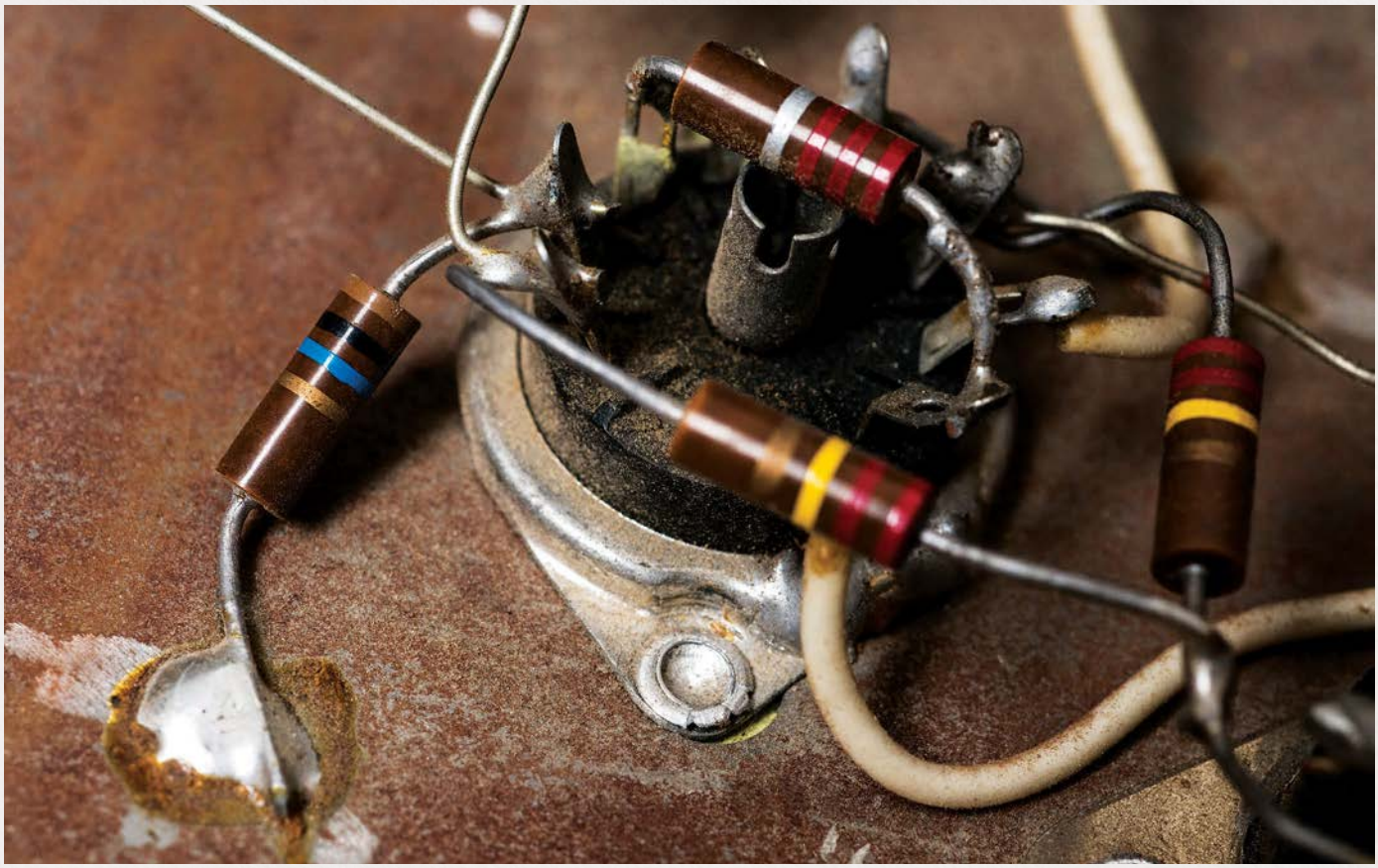
Vintage BENCH TEST

SILVER SERVICE

We're no strangers to retro Rickenbacker electrics and basses, but ancient Ricky amps are a great deal less common. Huw Price powers up this small and affordable 1960 M-8 combo...







Last issue in *G&B*, you may remember us being rather impressed with Carr's latest Mercury V, and it's hard not to feel a sense of déjà vu when sitting down with this Rickenbacker M-8. Most strikingly, they have almost identical silver-grey tolex, and both also feature proper point-to-point wiring. That's pretty much where the similarities end, however – in addition to the Carr costing almost 10 times as much as this old Ricky, they're also very different inside.

In 1953, FC Hall purchased the Rickenbacker company, and set about revamping the company's amplifier line-up. The M-8 made its debut in 1955 – albeit as an unnamed amplifier that was packaged up with a 'Student Hawaiian Guitar Set' and the specs changed over the years with altered badge placement, different preamp valves and various types of tolex used to cover it. Judging by the code on the Jensen P8-U Special Design ceramic speaker on our M-8, I'd suggest it was made towards the end of 1960.

By the time this M-8 rolled off the line, the 6AV6 preamp valve had been superseded by a 12AX7

Some things remained constant with the M-8, however, including the 5Y3 rectifier and a single-ended 6V6 power valve generating around four watts. By the time this M-8 rolled off the production line, the oddball 6AV6 preamp valve had been superseded by a 12AX7. All the valves in this amp are vintage USA-made examples from General Electric and Sylvania and no negative feedback is applied in the circuit. >

Opposite **Point-to-point wiring, 1950s-style**
Above left **Rickenbacker placed the name badges on the left and right, and sometimes on the cabinet itself**
Above right **Rather than hi/lo, both inputs sound identical so you could repurpose one jack socket hole to accommodate a tone control**

Above **There's a strong likelihood that these old US valves were fitted at the factory**

The cabinet is tiny but it feels surprisingly weighty and there's a clear moulded plastic carrying handle that is quintessentially retro. The Gretsch's simple control panel is located at the back and it's angled inwards to create a protective recess for a single volume control that doubles up as an on/off switch. Adjacent to the fuse-holder there's a jade green jewel light and the chassis is coated in silver hammertone with black silk-screened legending.

Two inputs are provided and they both sound the same, meaning that they were intended for multiple inputs rather than for high and low levels. The impedance rating isn't marked on the speaker but it reads seven ohms on the meter, and research indicates that Rickenbacker did indeed equip its M-8s with eight-ohm speakers rather than the four-ohm speakers that are generally associated with Fender Champs.

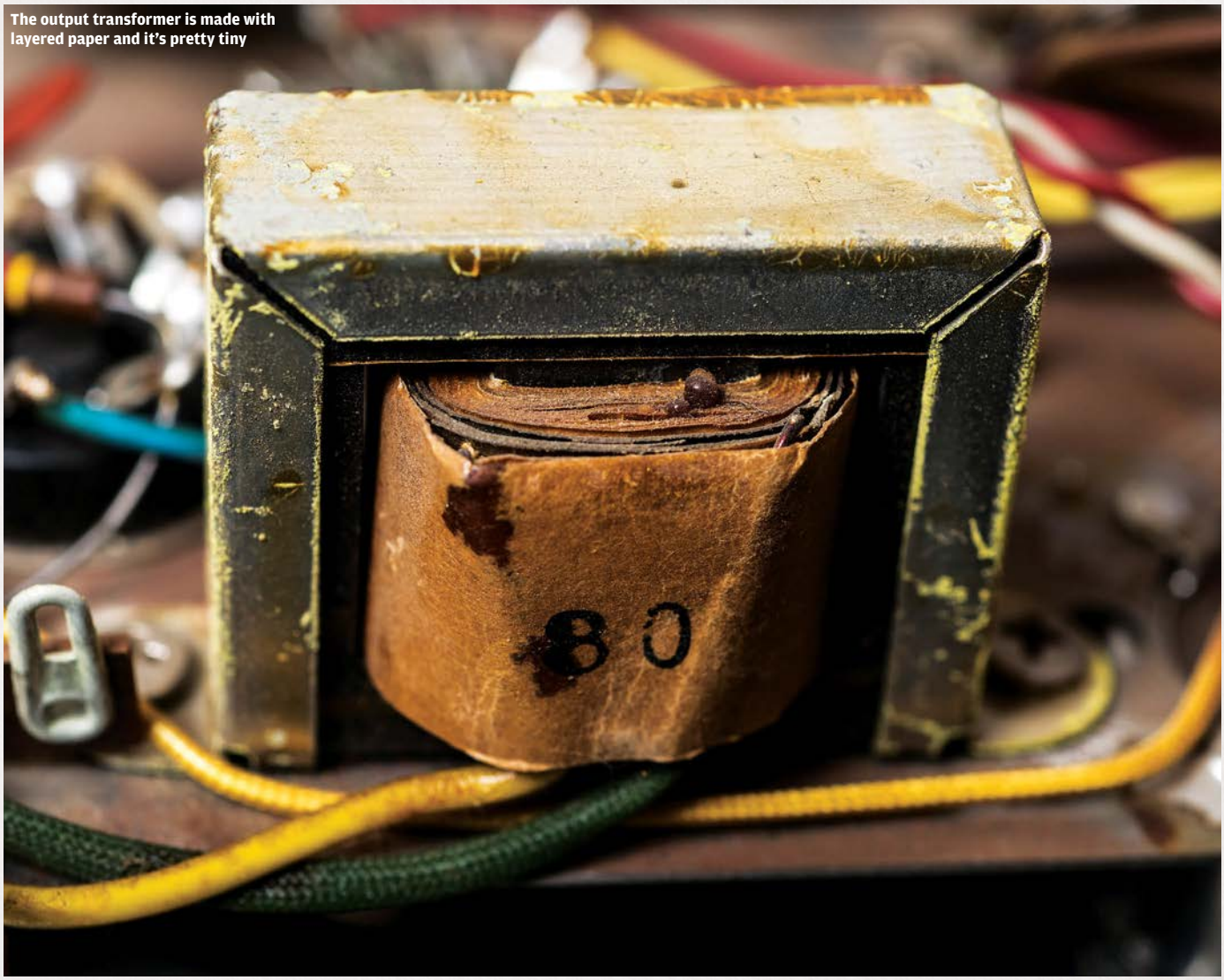
In Use

First things first – the original speaker is utterly dire, with a death rattle fizz and an extreme boxy honk through the mids. There's no doubt it needs a re-cone but even then I wouldn't expect miracles. In fact it's so bad I have to conduct all my tests on this amp using an external 12-inch speaker.

Once it warms up and settles down, the Rickenbacker's true voice begins to emerge

What a difference that makes – I was about to give up on this M-8 but once it warms up and settles down, its true voice begins to emerge. I get the impression that the initial design brief called for rolled off bass and low mids so as not to over-stress the output transformer or speaker. It was also configured for clean headroom and it works up to a point – about half-way on the volume control to be exact.

Below that, the M-8 sounds a bit dull and dark but push the volume control a little more and it quite suddenly comes to life with added sparkle and a general sense of the sound filling out across



The output transformer is made with layered paper and it's pretty tiny

the frequency rage. From that point onwards, the M-8 gets increasingly compressed, overdriven and slightly brighter in tone.

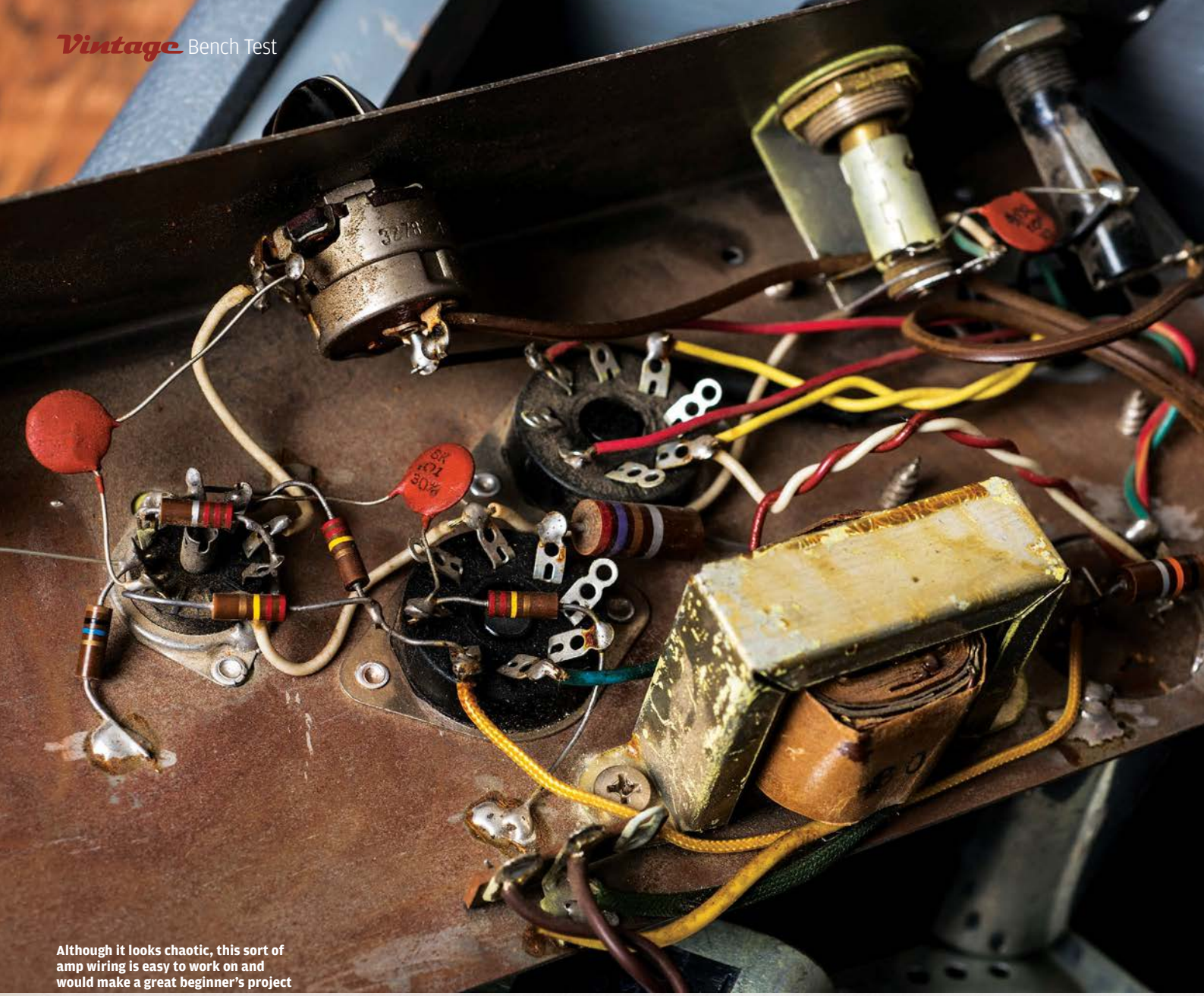
As brightness increases the lack of bass and low mids becomes more apparent. Then again this amp sounds far from trebly and even borderline dark with some humbuckers. But with bright PAFs or vintage T-style pickups, the clarity is more than adequate and it cleans up nicely if you have 50s wiring and or treble bleed capacitors in your guitar.

While low-power valve amps were once the stuff of starter packages for budding players, these days most of us buy them for overdriven tones at acceptable volume levels. If that's something that appeals to you, then you should be interested in an M-8 because the overdrive sounds fantastic.

It's smooth, harmonically rich and delivers exactly the sort of singing sustain that would normally require stompbox assistance. It's an old-school tone that suits swampy slide and Texas blues grind perfectly, but given the absence of tone control and the bandpass filter aspects of the circuit, good results are largely dependent on quality pickups and effective onboard guitar controls.

With just a cursory glance over the schematic I can identify several potential upgrades that might >

The amp still has its original Jensen speaker, but it doesn't sound great



Although it looks chaotic, this sort of amp wiring is easy to work on and would make a great beginner's project

KEY FEATURES

Rickenbacker M-8

- **PRICE** £299
- **DESCRIPTION** Single-ended combo amplifier, 110V power only. Made in the USA
- **BUILD** Single-channel, hand-wired valve combo
- **POWER RATING** 4W
- **VALVES** 1x 12AX7, 1x 6V6, 1x 5Y3
- **CONTROL PANEL** 2x input jacks, volume control/power switch
- **SPEAKER** 1x Jensen C8-U 8-ohm
- **DIMENSIONS** 350 x 310 x 155mm
- **WEIGHT** 4.55kg
- **CONTACT** Cranes Music 01792 654840 **www.cranes.co.uk**

widen the M8's frequency range, increase gain and afford a touch more frequency control. I'm talking about really simple things such as cathode bypass capacitors for the 12AX7 and 6V6, 100K plate resistors, a treble bleed capacitor and increased signal capacitor values. A simple tweed-style tone control could also be mounted in place of the second input socket.

Added to that, I'd of course consider a speaker upgrade, but be warned that there isn't enough space inside the cabinet for the usual Champ upgrade to a 10-inch. An accessible speaker jack would make it easy to connect the M-8 to an external cabinet, but in stock form the speaker wires are soldered to tags on the chassis, so you'd need to drill a small hole in the chassis. On the plus side, the eight-ohm rating broadens the scope for the speaker you could use.

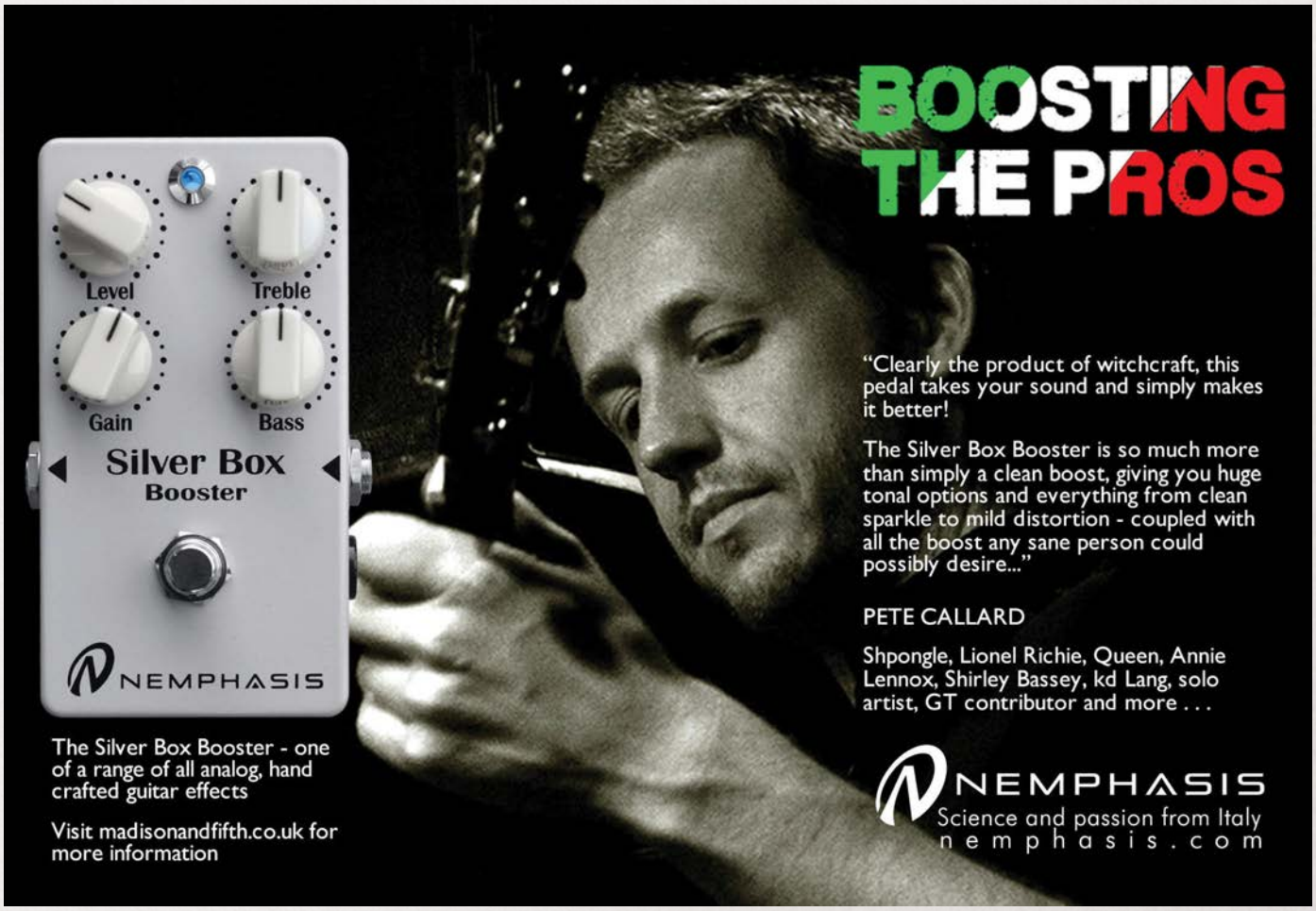
All told, the electronic modifications would cost no more than £10 or so in parts and it would be a quick and easy project. While one might hesitate to tweak a collectable tweed Champ in such a way, the less valuable Rickenbacker M-8 seems fair game, and it would be more than worth it.

There's something of the wolf in sheep's clothing about this amp – from a distance it looks cute and polite, but in a flash it can turn into a ferocious, snarling monster that will take your hand off! Played clean, the M-8 sounds mild-mannered and fairly ordinary but when cranked, it delivers the kind of creamy all-valve crunch and tenacious sustain that make it a worthy challenger for any Fender Champ.

There's something of the wolf in sheep's clothing about this amp – it can turn into a snarling monster

Considering its age, the overall condition of this amp is excellent, there are no missing parts and it's original down to the last screw. With cool vintage styling, the potential to upgrade and an affordable price tag, a Rickenbacker M-8 is well worth a punt if you come across one.

The two brown wires are speaker connections, but we would install a speaker jack to facilitate connection to external cabinets



Vintage PRIVATE COLLECTION

STRICTLY LIMITED

Not all guitar collections have to be sprawling exhibitions of the six-string art from. As the choice collection of instruments belonging to **DAVID PLUES** proves, small can be beautiful, too...

Story & Photography **Mark Alexander**

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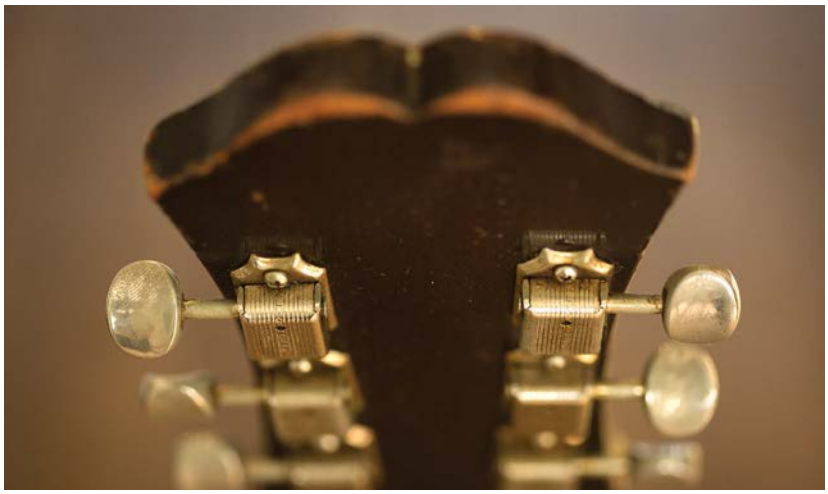
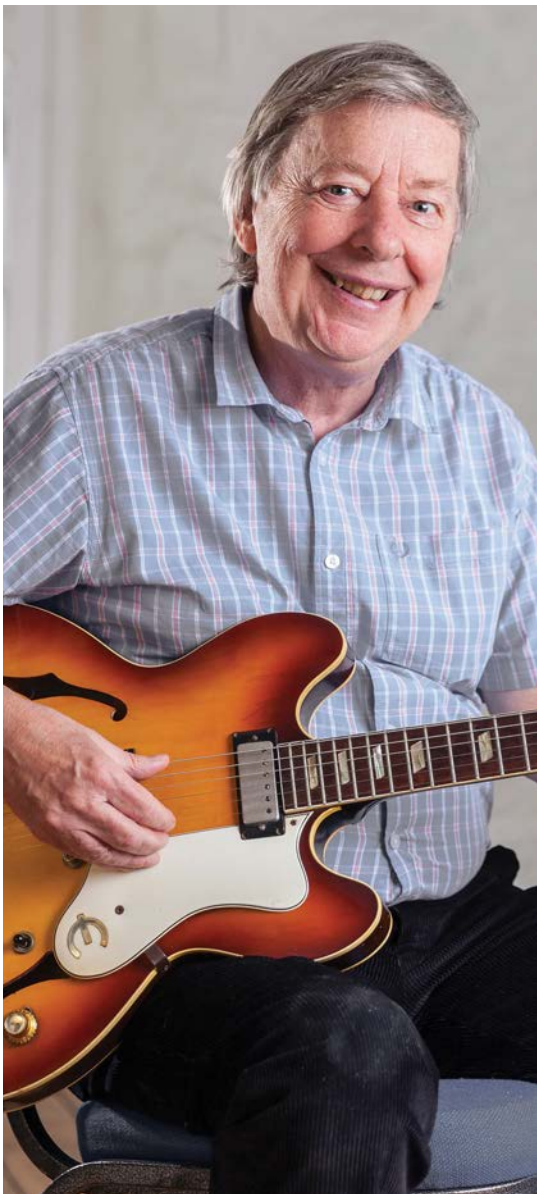




Above **David's dad bought him this Epiphone Riviera new in 1965 for 220 guineas and it was his faithful sidekick for two decades of cruise ship gigs**

It's fair to say that David Plues knows a thing or two about guitars. His ingrained knowledge of vintage instruments is a remarkable compendium of dates and serial numbers curated over years of playing the most sought-after six-string incarnations known to man. Yet despite his formidable understanding of some of the world's most prized guitars, Plues remains unassuming; a retired musician who's happy to spend his days perusing guitar shows, occasionally picking up a rarity for his collection.

"This must be one of the smallest collections to appear in the magazine, but each instrument has an interesting history dating all the way back to the 1930s," he says. We have decided to meet in a former cotton-spinning mill, which itself dates back to 1788. The impressive building is now run as a visitor and exhibition centre by Dumfries and Galloway council and is full of displays showcasing the glory of the mill's industrial past. The poignancy of the venue is lost on no-one.

As well as contributing to *Guitar & Bass* on occasion, Plues also applies his knowledge to the *Burst Believers* series of books, and creates videos detailing some of the most eclectic and mouth-watering guitar collections on the planet. As a result, he gets up close and personal with guitars that are docketed with price tags punctuated with a comma or two.

Riviera Cruising

Despite the AAA access to some of the most stunning guitars ever made, one instrument has never left his side; an Epiphone Riviera which he acquired in 1965. "It was the most thing expensive in the shop," he recalls. "That was when the regulations had eased off and American imports were being let in. As a result, the shop was full of sunbursts and custom-coloured Strats. But my dad said a Strat was just a plank of wood, and he directed me to the larger hollowbodies. But, I didn't want a jazz guitar. I was young and hip; I didn't want a deep Gibson ES-175. The store was full of Stratocasters for 156 guineas, but I chose the Epiphone Riviera at 220 guineas, which happened to match my bass player's Epiphone Rivoli."

Plues would eventually learn to love the curves of the Fender, but not before taking his Riviera out on the road for 20 years travelling around the world working

for the likes of P&O Cruises. He played his Epiphone initially through a Burns 2x10, but replaced that with a Vox AC30 Top Boost. His set-up was simple but effective, and remarkably resilient.

"I carried no spare guitar, no spare valves or parts. A friendly amp engineer in Sydney re-valved my amp in exchange for an early wah pedal," he recollects. "When departing from Sydney Harbour, we performed on the open decks to huge crowds sending off their loved ones. This was in the heat of the day, often in temperatures of around 100°F. The Epiphone must have suffered, but it never let me down. I still have it with no neck breaks or alterations. Plugged direct into an AC30 and turned up to nine, the tone was wonderful. The combination of mini-humbuckers, centre block and a Frequensator tailpiece adds up to a great blues tone with plenty of control direct from the guitar."

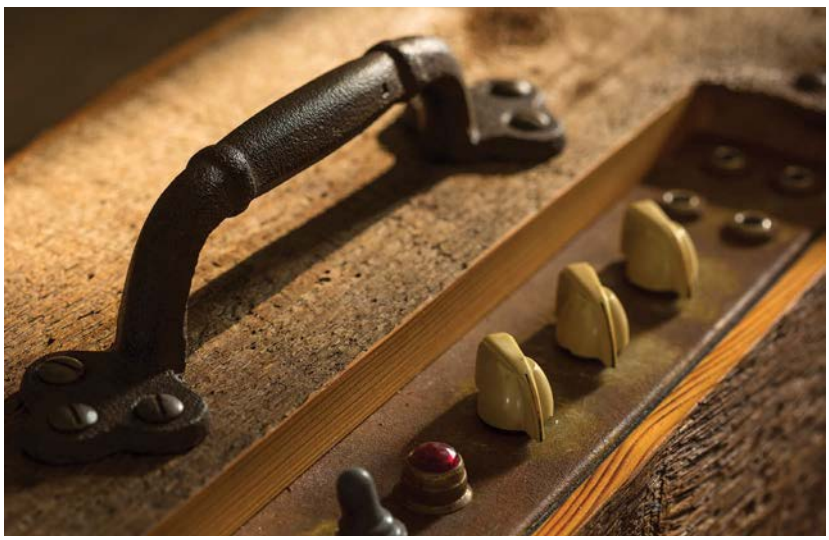
"The Strat belonged to a US Master Sergeant who was one of the last to be airlifted from Saigon in 1975"

Rhythm Of Life

Plues started playing guitar at the age of 12 years old. "The house was full of guitars," he explains. "My dad was a steel guitarist who was very much into Hawaiian guitar – I've still got his 78s of Sol Ho'op'ii and Harry Brooker. He used to build his own steel guitars and wound his own pickups in the kitchen. I grew up surrounded by records and music."

When his dad, who was a gigging musician, needed a rhythm guitarist, he would enlist his son to sit behind him on stage to provide accompaniment. It was an apprenticeship that would stand him in good stead when he later became a journeyman musician himself. It was such an important period, that he still proudly displays his father's Roy Smeck Concert ukulele, which has been in his family since 1937 and on which he first started to learn music at the tender age of eight. >

Top left **Gibson Mark Knopfler 1958 Les Paul Standard VOS**
Bottom left **Gibson Les Paul Collectors Choice #5 'Donna'**
Right **David's 1957 Fender Stratocaster came with an American flag, in which the original owner had wrapped the guitar during the US evacuation of Vietnam in 1975**



Above **The most recent addition to David's collection is this Fender Custom Shop Tobacco Barn Tone Monster amplifier**
Opposite **Taylor Cocobolo GS Fall Limited**

"I've played in country bands, I've played in jazz bands, I've played in rock bands. I've played in terrible bands and I've played in some very good bands. I've done it all," says Plues, who eventually retired his Epiphone in favour of a Strat. "For a long time, my working guitar was a Clapton Strat, just because it was very flexible. When you're playing in a function band that has to cover every type of style, that Strat did it."

Plues plied his trade for 30 years covering just about every style of music to every kind of audience. He retired in 1990, and by then he'd had enough. So, the Strat and his Mesa/Boogie stack were sold. "I sold everything but my Epiphone, my Copicat and the ukulele," he confirms.

Lighting The Fire

The next 20 years saw Plues take a well-earned break from music. It was a time to reflect and enjoy retirement, but the passion that had been instilled in him by his father would resurface when a friend persuaded him to visit the Arlington Guitar Show in Texas. "I regained my interest in guitars in 2008," he remembers. "A friend had been to the Arlington Guitar Show and said it was unbelievable. He said it was so big it would take us three days to go round it. So I went to see and right enough it was fantastic. Mind-blowing. Every dealer in the world goes to Arlington. Norman Harris from Norman's Rare Guitars goes there to stock his shop and buys 60 vintage guitars in a day."

"As you bring in the guitar more, the amp starts to soar and sing... but my wife won't let me do that!"

A fire had been lit once again. Before he knew it, Plues was actively seeking out a vintage Strat but found them overpriced or plagued by issues associated with rewound pickups or changed pots. Then he found a 1957 Strat, which he describes as "all-original and 8/10 condition", with a truly remarkable backstory.

"Playing it through a small valve amp or an older Twin Reverb is very satisfying," he says. "The guitar originally belonged to a US Master Sergeant who served in Vietnam and was one of the last to be airlifted from

ACOUSTIC HEAVEN

Although Plues has surrounded himself with solidbody and semi-hollow electrics, these days he mainly plays acoustics. And if he wants to record a tune or simply impress the socks off someone, he pulls out his Taylor Cocobolo GS Fall Limited, which is simply a jaw-dropper.

"Really it's a Taylor 814 with special tuners and a cocobolo back and sides," he says simply. "It's a beautifully made guitar and great for recording – it's deep, it's full. It's stunning."

The guitar has very expansive low end, healthy volume and clear articulation. It's the kind of acoustic you hear from across a room and it just stops you in your tracks. The deep colour on the back and sides really draws the eye and the tone is unmistakable.

Unusually for Plues, he acquired the guitar via the internet, although the actual deal was done at a guitar show in 2012. "The seller brought it to a guitar show. He had paid about £3,000 for it and his wife was making him sell it, so the deal was done!"

Saigon on the 29 April 1975. They were based at the US Embassy or the CIA HQ, which features in the famous photo of the ladder leading to the helicopter. The main official US Embassy flag was removed when the US Ambassador was ordered to evacuate. The flag that came with the '57 Stratocaster was probably from one of the several guard rooms that surrounded the American Embassy grounds."

We've all encountered a guitar with a tale that seems too far-fetched to be true, but David did his homework. "The story was verified by the daughter of the guitar's original owner," he confirms. "The guitar had been wrapped in the flag since that date."

Sourcing a vintage guitar from the 1950s that had not only survived the ravages of time but also the chaotic aftermath of the Vietnam War is a remarkable feat. But its ability to endure isn't its most noteworthy quality – it's the tone. Full of the brightness you would expect from a Strat, the '57 sunburst is blessed with a deep resonance that just makes it sing.

It's a beautiful example, benefitting from a wonderfully generous maple neck and, of course, a history covering seven decades. "I bought it because it was the best-sounding Strat I had heard. It is totally clean, 100 per cent, and a superb guitar." >

Above **David's small but stunning collection, including his father's Roy Smeck Concert ukulele, which has been in his family since 1937**
Opposite **David playing his beloved Epiphone Riviera on stage during his days as musician on cruise ships, and *that* Knopfler Les Paul**

'Burst To Last

Plues was back in the game as a reinvigorated collector with an eye for something special. His trip to Arlington in 2008 had not only sparked his interest in guitars, but had also given him the opportunity to forge friendships with other like-minded enthusiasts. One in particular led to a collaboration that would result in a valuable addition to his collection.

"In 2008, I met Tom Wittrock, who is a big dealer and has some of the nicest 'Bursts on the planet. Two years later, I went to his house to make a DVD about his collection," Plues says.

In the same year, the Gibson Custom Collector's Choice series was launched. The idea was to meticulously model famous originals owned by collectors with Wittrock being one of the people Gibson contacted. Attention grabbed, Plues was keen to get his hands on a replica of Wittrock's 1959 Les Paul, called Donna.

"A fairly recent addition to my collection was the Gibson Les Paul Collectors Choice #5 133 which I arranged to pick up at the Arlington Guitar Show in 2015," he says. "I had the advantage of placing the guitar next to the original Donna and was initially disappointed. The #5 133 was too dark and the wrong centre yellow had formed a poor sunburst. It was not what I was expecting. Edwin Wilson, the Custom Shop manager, took a look and agreed the finish was not all it should be and offered to take it back to Nashville to get the Custom Shop to refinish the top. I was happy with this, because I recognised that the actual maple cap was an exceptional example with a great flame."

The work was duly completed and the #5 133 (version two) was delivered to a happy Plues. "The guitar plays with all the quality you expect from a top-line Custom Shop instrument and after years of playing Fenders, the volume and tone variations available from the guitar were a reminder of my years playing the Epiphone."

And it didn't stop there. When Gibson announced the imminent release of the Mark Knopfler 1958 Les Paul Standard VOS; a precise replica of Knopfler's original '58, guess who was in the queue to bag one?

> *"Gibson certainly got the Mark Knopfler Les Paul right, the ageing is remarkably convincing"*

"When I heard Gibson was making a Mark Knopfler artist model, I made arrangements to acquire one of the first 50 signed and aged models. These were shipped to Gibson's London office where Mark demo'd one for a video," says Plues. "Gibson certainly got this one right, the ageing is remarkably convincing and the finish is a pure '58 low-gloss. The sound is quite bright with a clear natural tone when the volume is backed off."

Knopfler describes the '58 as a "phenomenal" guitar that "just works straight out of the box", and you can see what he means. The guitar has bite where it needs it and clears up when the volume is rolled off. The neck is reassuringly meaty although Plues says it is more like a '59 than a stereotypically chunkier '58.

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"There are two types of reissues," he says. "The artist models or the Collectors' Choice. Collectors' Choice are a less good investment because no-one knows who Tom Wittrock is, unless they are big into 'Bursts. With the Jimmy Page, Billy Gibbons and Knopfler guitars, Gibson got a shock. Every one was sold on pre-order."

Barn Stormer

Whether it's the '57 Strat, '58 Knopfler or '59 Wittrock, they make your hair stand on end played through Plues's latest acquisition – a Fender Custom Shop Tobacco Barn amp. It's one of only five built, and it's the only one with UK voltage. The amp is constructed using pine from a 100-year-old tobacco barn and hand-built by Fender Custom Shop's Shawn Green and Jim Dolmage. Internally, the amp includes Fender's vintage 'blue' capacitors, Allen Bradley resistors and, crucially, a massive 15-inch Celestion Fullback speaker, which gives the amp a huge bottom end.

"It has a very deep sound," says Plues. "It is designed to do that Joe Bonamassa thing where you plug a Les Paul in to it and turn the amp up to 10, then dial back the guitar and it will be as clean as a whistle. As you bring in the guitar volume more, it starts to soar and sing... but my wife won't let me do that!"

Based on a 5E3 Deluxe, the amp is constructed from light, ultra-resonant solid pine and, as Plues explains, it's a stripped-down, straight-ahead kind of circuit. "There is nothing in the amp; there's no reverb, there's no send and return, there's no tremolo. But I am a Fender fan, and it has that classic sound. I've tried Twin Reverb silverfaces from the 70s and a blackface from the 60s and they've got the sound I like, and so does this amp."

Delivered with its own sumptuous coffee-table book that details the build process, the 'Tone Monster', as Fender describes it, is an awesome sounding amp packed with punch and bristle while maintaining the kind of head room that seemingly has no bounds. "It's all about tone," Plues concludes. "I don't play with distortion. For me, an amplifier must sound beautiful and pristine clean. It's the sound that I have used most of my life."

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All about... Torrefaction

The controlled burning of tonewoods may seem like a crazy notion, but some guitar manufacturers are touting it as a major advancement in guitar tone. So is torrefaction for real or simply half-baked? **HUW PRICE** finds out...

Many players are chasing vintage tone, but most of us would prefer not to pay vintage prices, and this has sparked a search for several 'magic bullet' solutions in the last few decades. The pachyderm in the parlour, however, is that for all the time and effort that goes into meticulously recreated pickups and parts, they are invariably screwed or glued onto instruments made from relatively fresh wood.

If we accept there is some truth in the belief that vintage instruments sound different to even the most exacting repros and reissues, it follows that the tonewood itself may be the determining factor. Most of the same woods that were used for pre-war Martin acoustics, 1950s Gibsons and 60s Fenders are still available and remain in common use. 'Same wood but different tone' suggests that wood changes as it ages.

This belief in the tonal superiority of old wood has led to some frankly regrettable 'conversions' of perfectly good vintage guitars. A more positive development has been the increased use of reclaimed timber. While this can be successful on a bespoke basis, reclaimed timber is not obtainable in sufficient quantities for high-volume guitar production.

Fortunately the aging process of wood is a long established field of scientific research that has been pursued well away from the myth-mongering of vintage guitar dealers and fondest fantasies of Les Paul enthusiasts. Now it seems that the missing piece of the vintage tone jigsaw may have been found.

The buzzwords you'll doubtless have heard are torrefaction, roasting, tempering, caramelisation and rectification – but they

Aside from any tonal benefits, torrefaction enhances the wood's natural figure. Maple takes on a lovely caramel hue and smells great, too

all amount to the same thing. We're talking about thermally treating tonewood to condense decades of aging into a matter of hours. The rationale is that if you can induce changes at a molecular level that make the physical properties of fresh tonewood more like its decades old equivalent, the tonal qualities will follow suit.

Although touted as the latest shortcut to vintage tone, torrefaction has been around since the Vikings invented the booze cruise. So what is it and why all the recent excitement?

Burning issues

Obviously tone wasn't a big priority for Viking shipwrights. What they needed were strong seagoing vessels that would remain watertight. Even well-seasoned timber is susceptible to changes in temperature and humidity – especially when it's frequently in and out of water.

The Vikings used torrefied wood because it absorbs less moisture so size and shape are more likely to remain consistent after it has been sawed and planed. In other words it's stronger and more stable as well as being lighter, which means it's equally well suited to shipbuilding, wooden flooring and guitar making.

Torrefying already seasoned wood speeds the aging process by cooking off the volatile contents of the timber

Guitar manufacturers such as Rickenbacker have long been using heat-treated timber for this very reason – while making no claims of tonal superiority. In recent years, Gibson has utilised torrefied maple for some fingerboards as an alternative to rosewood.

The torrefaction process involves baking wood in an oxygen free environment at temperatures higher than conventional timber seasoning kilns. Taken to its logical conclusion you would end up with charcoal but stopped short, the wood merely darkens depending on how long it has been roasted.

This colour change occurs due to chemical reactions between the wood's proteins and its natural sugars, and torrefied maple can range from soft amber to a deep reddish brown that is closer to cherry or even walnut. You can observe similar outcomes with spruce and the colour change permeates throughout the timber.

Growing old gracefully

Maine-based luthier Dana Bourgeois was among the first US luthiers to use torrefied timber. He told Reverb.com that freshly cut wood is mostly cellulose bound together with lignin and contains volatile elements including "pitches, sugars, oils, and... considerable water content".

Regular timber seasoning reduces the water content but the goal is to ensure that any potential shrinking or warping takes place during the process, not once the guitar has been assembled. However, seasoning does not remove the volatile elements that supposedly dampen the resonance and slow down the wood's transient response.

Bourgeois describes how, over the course of several decades, these volatiles eventually vacate the wood as they, "oxidise, gas off and mineralise. The slow chemical reaction emits a gas and leaves a mineral residue. The lignin also sets like glue, holding the cellulose together". Once this has taken place, the timber should be lighter, stiffer and quicker to respond than when it was first used to build the guitar.

The great bake-off

Torrefying already seasoned wood speeds the process by cooking off the volatile contents of the timber and leaving behind the mineral residue. It also induces changes in the cellular structure that would otherwise take half a lifetime. Going from an open to closed cell structure prevents the wood from re-hydrating. In other words once it's dry, it will stay dry.

Contrast this with seasoned wood that is dried to the point where the water vapour pressure in the wood and the surrounding ambient space are more or less equal. This is called 'the equilibrium moisture content' but since the wood remains hygroscopic, it can continue to release and absorb moisture depending on what the atmospheric conditions are.

When acoustic guitars dry out, the wood wants to shrink but the glue joints will try to hold firm. This is why cracks and splits can appear and it's very common to see the evidence on old acoustics. Consequently we're advised to keep all-solid guitars hydrated, but while this may help to prevent cracks from occurring, it also inhibits the ageing process described by Bourgeois.

Consequently your well-hydrated acoustic may sound excellent, and you should feel good about maintaining it properly, however you're unlikely to hear 'vintage' sounds from it in your own lifetime. And if you try to force the aging process by drying out your guitar, it's likely to develop structural issues.

This is a crucial argument for building acoustics with torrefied wood. Since it's non-hygroscopic, torrefied wood is far less likely to expand or contract, meaning guitars will be less vulnerable to atmospheric conditions and less likely to crack.

Torrefied wood is also said to have the stiffness and quick tap tone response of decades old wood, so it sounds more 'vintage'.

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Dennis Fano has utilised tempered and reclaimed wood on his Novo models

Compared to seasoned but non-torrefied wood the tone is more consistent because it's less susceptible to atmospheric conditions. These tonal benefits, rather than the improved stability, explain why heat-treated timber has moved onto the radar of electric guitar builders, too.

Taste the difference

So, is it just a gimmick or is there something in torrefaction that goes beyond clever marketing? Although we haven't conducted the kind of tests that would produce a raft of conclusive empirical evidence, several members of the team have formed opinions based on DIY builds and encounters with review instruments.

We recently used an Allparts one-piece roasted neck in a partscaster build and were mightily impressed with its look and feel. Despite a massive 50s profile it was light in weight, and when tapped the neck produced a pure note that rang for a full two seconds.

Although it ended up bolted onto a lightweight but non-torrefied swamp ash body, the guitar turned out to be one of the loudest, liveliest and most resonant T-style instruments we've ever encountered. This first experience building with torrefied parts was exciting to say the least.

On the electric side, our editor recently reviewed two of Dennis Fano's new Novo instruments, both of which featured tempered pine bodies and roasted maple necks. He praised their acoustic volume and resonance and the Serus T even scored a perfect 10. *G&B*'s stateside correspondent Dave Hunter is also a fan.

Heat-treated tonewoods can contribute significantly towards tonality and dynamic response

On the acoustic side, this writer has recently encountered the Bourgeois D-Custom featuring a torrefied Adirondack spruce top and Alister Atkin's banner headstock-inspired model, The Forty Three. The Bourgeois' specialised voicing made it hard to assess whether its temperature-treated top had any 'vintage' sonic attributes, but the Atkin was an absolute revelation, even though it arrived hot on the heels of a Fairbanks take on a Gibson Nick Lucas and a couple of 1930s Gibsons that featured in Vintage Bench Test. The Fairbanks is undeniably a superb acoustic guitar but there is nothing especially 'vintage' about its tone... yet. In contrast the Atkin genuinely sounded like a vintage Gibson straight out of the box, with a dark sparkle and arid woodiness that hitherto we hadn't considered achievable with a brand new acoustic. Another guitar that was awarded top marks.

Although the findings of the *G&B* team were arrived at separately, they have ended up being very closely aligned. Long term structural stability is tough to assess but our experiences suggest that heat-treated tonewoods used in new acoustic and electric instruments can contribute significantly towards the kind of tonality and dynamic response more commonly associated with vintage instruments.

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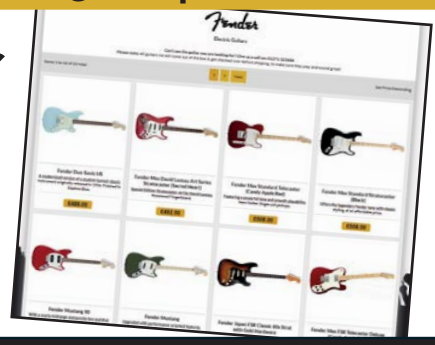

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Chord Clinic

This month's Chord Clinic continues our exploration of the textural possibilities of open strings and travels to some less common keys. **ROD FOGG** journeys to distant lands...

If you are going to try to create interesting textures using the open strings of the guitar in combination with fretted notes to it stands to reason that some keys are going to be easier than others. E major and minor, A major and minor and D, C and G majors are the standout choices but as we found out in the May 2017 edition of Chord Clinic, F major gets a look in as well. This month we are going to challenge ourselves to play in the keys no one usually bothers with – starting with G# minor.

In figure 1, a G♯m chord (which we could have called A♭ minor) is made a little more interesting by using the open B string as the minor third and adding the ninth, A♯ sharp on the G string. As these notes are only a semitone apart this creates a juicy dissonance in this chord. The fifth is omitted and the lower two notes of the chord begin as repeated root notes, an octave apart. In the following shapes we then keep hold of the ninth while playing a descending inner voice, which makes its way through two types of seventh and two types of sixth before arriving back on G♯madd9 nine, this time including the fifth. The final two chords are II and V in G♯m, sending you back to the top of the eight-bar progression and making effective use of the open E string for added colour.

Fingerstyle arpeggios will work best with most of these examples. As a rule, start with your thumb on the bass note and then play a repeating pattern using the index, middle and ring fingers, either six or eight notes to a bar. It can be effective to re-pick the bass note near the end of the pattern – experiment and see what works for you.

Sharp dresser (Fig 1)

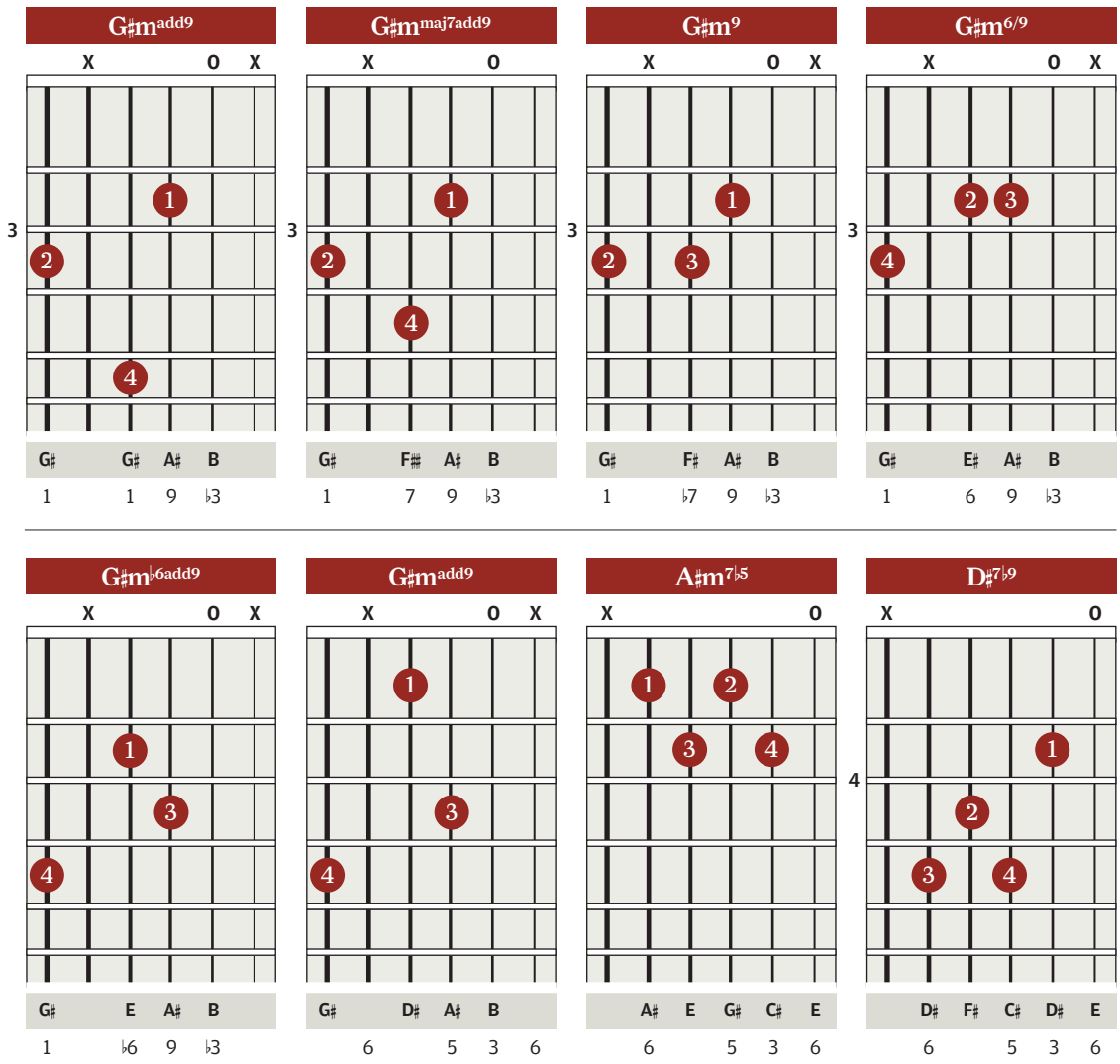
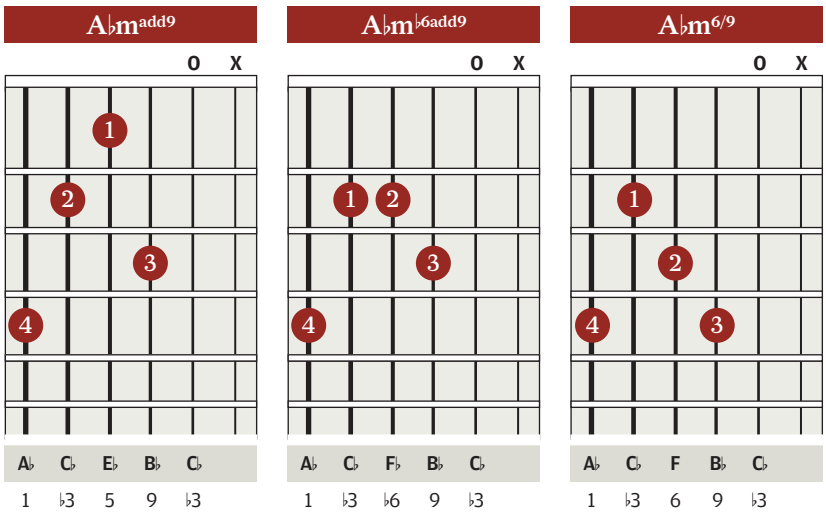


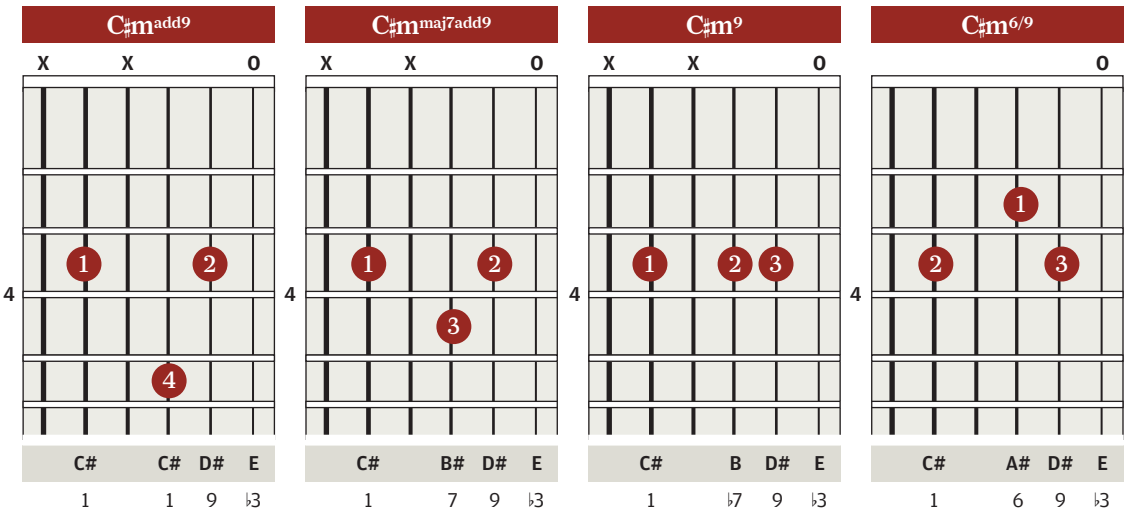
Figure 2 is technically in the same key as figure 1, but we have made the "enharmonic" change to calling it A♭ minor. This is because it is interesting to compare how the naming conventions give us results such as "F𝄪" in G♯mMaj7 and "C♭" and "F♭" in A♭m♭6add9. There are just three chords in figure 2, but they make a good four bar sequence if you cycle back to the second chord when you've played them in the written order. Once again we have the dissonance between the open minor third, C♭, and the fretted B♭, but this time there's the added weight of the root, third and fifth at the bottom of the chord. There's a hint of the Bond theme about this progression, but in fact this sequence has been used many times, not least in the jazz tune *Cry Me A River*.

The first chord in figure 3 is the same voicing as the first chord in figure 1, but it has been moved one string across the guitar to make use of the open E string as the minor third in this set of four chords >

Enharmonic fun (Fig 2)



Moving across (Fig 3)



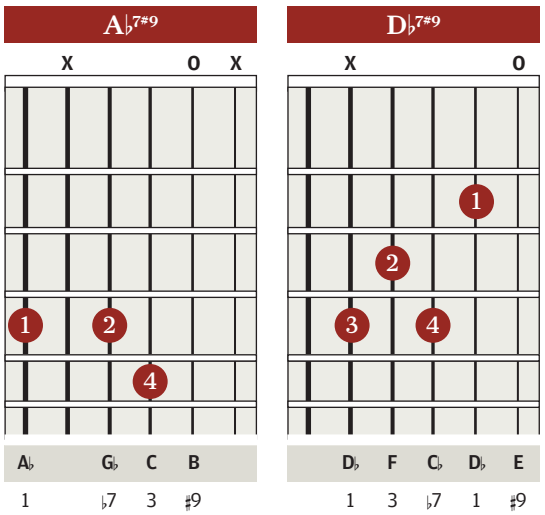
in C♯ minor. As before, we have a descending inner voice together with the semitone clash between the D♯ on the B string and the open E. It would be possible to carry on down the G string to C#m♭6add9, with finger one at the second fret, and C#madd9 with finger one at the first fret. If you can work out D#m7♭5 and G#7 you would have an eight-bar sequence with the II – V turnaround just as in figure 1.

Figure 4 is funky instead of dreamy and might be better played using thumb and fingers with a snappy block chord approach in preference to arpeggios. Note the use of the open strings in these chords to add dissonance. The idea is to treat it as a two-chord groove; record it into your looper and then see if you can wing a solo – an A♭ blues scale should do the trick. Figure 5 covers similar ground two frets further down the guitar. You can try playing figures four and five as a four-bar sequence; stop on the B7 chord and play a bassline to take you back to A♭ to repeat the pattern.

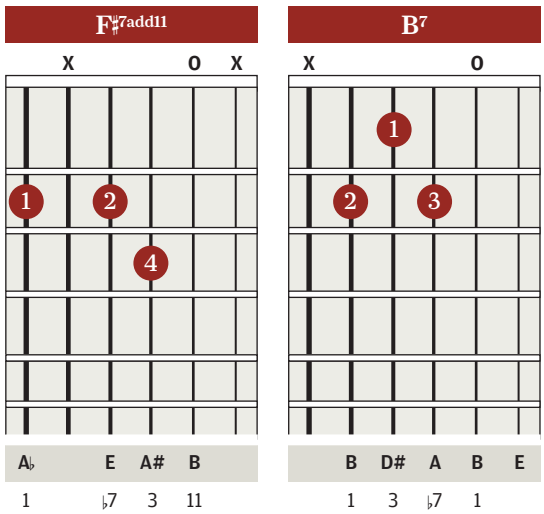
It's back to arpeggios one again for the final figure 6 of this month's Chord Clinic. It can be difficult finding much use for the open strings in the key of E♭, but in this example we have two notes at the same pitch, the open G and the fifth fret on the D string, and both are the third of the chord. Stand your pick hand fingers on their tips to avoid accidentally muting the open string. This drone effect adds a sombre quality to the four-chord sequence; perhaps you could work out a similar approach using a C minor chord as an answering four bars.

And that's it! You'll notice that we've stuck to the brief here, and managed to avoid any reference to the easier keys in which the guitar tends to be played naturally. Hopefully, this month's Chord Clinic will inspire you to experiment with some of these more challenging and unfamiliar keys next time you find yourself in need of a little bit of six-string stimulation. Have fun and see you next month!

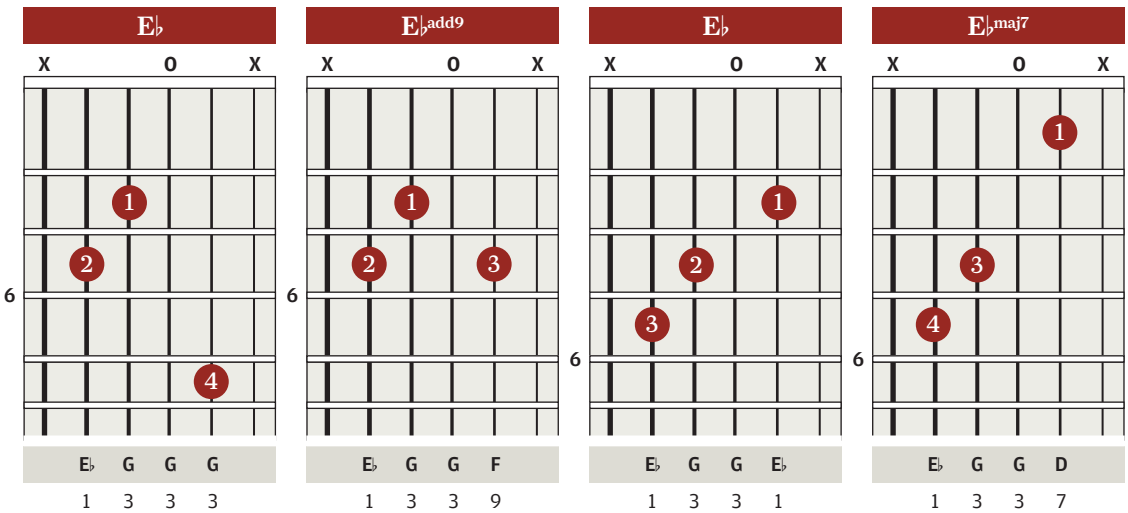
Get funky (Fig 4)



Down with funk (Fig 5)



Back to arpeggios (Fig 6)



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Fretbuzz

Your letters. This month: more short-scale string theory, YouTube tone tips, giant killing and more...

LETTER OF THE MONTH

'Stangs For The Memories

Dear *G&B*, Taking up your invitation to chip in on the short-scale bass issue... I've been playing bass guitar on and off for more than 50 years, usually Precisions or Jazzes but after some back trouble a while ago I had to look for something lighter but that would still deliver a good thump.

As a Fender man, the Mustang short-scale bass at 30 inches was the obvious choice so I put one together from parts bought online (a Partstang? Or, as one friend ungraciously called it, a 'bus pass bass'). In fact it's like a small Precision Bass, but much lighter at around 7.25lbs and delivers a great tone.

When it came to the strings I wanted a 60s vibe so went for flatwounds, but what? La Bella do make a set of strings specifically for the Mustang (Deep Talkin' Bass 760F-MUS) but some people don't like the skinny-looking wrap ends. So after some research I came across D'Addario XL Chromes (45 to 100) in medium scale length. Yes, medium scale length, not short. That's because the Mustang Bass is a string-through body and some sets of short-scale strings won't fit – an expensive mistake to make, especially where flatwounds are concerned.

Thanks to Phil Harley for raising the short-scale issue and *G&B* for giving it some space!

Paul Harrington, via email

G&B Cheers for the recommendations, Paul – clearly this has been an issue about which our four-string readers have strong opinions, so please don't hesitate to throw your two cents in if you have something to add!

WRITTEN A LETTER OF THE MONTH?

The you win a Peterson StroboClip HD clip-on tuner worth £51.99! The SC-HD has the same tenth-of-a-cent accuracy as all Peterson Strobe Tuners, but in clip-on form, with a bright HD screen, over 50 Sweetened tunings and alternate temperaments for other stringed instruments.* For more, visit **petersontuners.com**

**Letter of the month prize is subject to availability and may change*

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Cheshire Cats

Dear *G&B*, in your last issue, John Minshull asked about getting hold of luthiers in Cheshire, and I may be able to help! Although I now live in Moray, I have been using Barry at KGB Guitars in Birkenhead as guitar tech (if that's not too far away from John) for about three years, and have found them excellent for knowledge and service. Check out their website (kgb-music.co.uk), they are well worth a chat (0151 647 3268) or visit them at Pacific Road, Birkenhead. Hope this helps!

Bob Moon, Moray

Sweet Music Everywhere

Hello *G&B*, I just wanted to drop you a line to say that I thought Chris's demo for the Fender American Professional Telecaster on your YouTube channel had such a fantastic tone – please tell me how you got it! I'm a beginner with a 2016 American Standard (I think) Telecaster and I would like to be able to duplicate the sound you got on your demo. If you can enlighten me it would be very much appreciated!

Mark Jacobs, via email

G&B Very nice of you to say so! The set-up we used was the American Pro Tele running into a Swart Atomic Space Tone combo (backed off for clean, cranked for gain) with no stompbox effects, just a little tremolo and reverb from the amplifier itself. Now seems as good a time as any to remind anyone who hasn't checked out our YouTube channel to head over to youtube.com/theguitarmagazine and subscribe for hot new gear demos!

Might Be Giants

Dear *G&B*, my attention was grabbed by your 'Giant Killer' strapline and I drove home in some anticipation of a good read. I must admit that I was a bit disappointed, however, as although the article was excellent as always, I don't think the guitar in question qualifies as a giant-killer. I appreciate your point of custom shop vs stock production but at the price range you're still essentially comparing like objects. Rather like calling a Maserati or Lamborghini a Ferrari giant-killer. I'd say a sub-£800 price would be needed for a true Goliath vs David contest.

DE Siddon, via email

G&B We understand where you're coming from, however when you consider that the Eastman costs a fair chunk less than an equivalent production guitar from one of the big brands, and the quality could be put up against Custom Shop guitars four times the price, it's certainly punching far above its weight. Maybe for the sake of your analogy, it's less calling a Maserati a Ferrari-killer, and more calling a McLaren a Bugatti Veyron-killer?

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New music

We round up and rate a selection of this month's guitar-driven releases and reissues

Roger Waters

IS THIS THE LIFE WE REALLY WANT?

There's an argument to be made that this is finest Pink Floyd solo album ever, but there's a kicker. Despite the presence of serial collaborator Jonathan Wilson on guitar, *Is This The Life We Really Want?* contains no guitar solos, and there's a clear mandate here that nobody tries to fill the void left by David Gilmour. That said, Waters defiantly states his claim here as the architect behind Floyd's overall sound, and vast swathes could sit happily on their classic 70s long-players. Floyd geeks will, of course, play spot the back catalogue reference, but that would be to miss out on a musical tour de force from Waters – angry, politicised, tender and remarkably consistent, it's a superb piece of work that rewards multiple listens. Floyd's swansong, *Endless River*, sounds positively wishy washy in comparison. **SH**

9/10

TRY IF YOU LIKE *Pink Floyd, David Gilmour*

Ride

WEATHER DIARIES

We can thank Beady Eye for this record's existence. Had Liam Gallagher's new band taken off, Ride probably wouldn't have reconvened in 2014. The comeback album hasn't been rushed, though, and *Weather Diaries* wholly justifies this approach. It's a pleasing amalgam of their easy shoegaze days and the songcraft of *Carnival of Light* and *Tarantula*. Opener *Lannoy Point* is a woozy gem, full of blissed-out chiming guitar atmospherics and synth washes. *Charm Assault* is a heavier beast, and the urgent *All I Want* is an emotive reaction against the UK's foreign policy. They return to My Bloody Valentine-style layered guitars on the beatific *Home is a Feeling* and kick out the jams for the heavy-riffing *Lateral Alice*. Ride play to their strengths here – we forecast a sunny future. **SH**

8/10

TRY IF YOU LIKE *My Bloody Valentine, The Jesus And Mary Chain*

Sufjan Stevens, Bryce Dessner, Nico Muhly, James McAlister

PLANETARIUM

Planetarium is an ambitious concept record from Sufjan Stevens, the National's Bryce Dessner, classical composer Nico Muhly and regular Stevens collaborator James McAlister. With each track named after a celestial body, you might expect an inaccessible prog vanity project, but not so. The sensibilities of the composers are too well-honed to allow this fascinating blend of indie-rock guitar, electronica and classical arrangements to delve too far off the self-indulgent deep end. As befits an album about space, jittery synths take the lead here, but the delay and reverb-heavy counterpoint of Dessner's provides atmospheric counterpoint to Steven's new age vocals, notably on *Venus*. It's not for everyone, but it's an undeniably bold and singular musical endeavour. **JG**

7/10

TRY IF YOU LIKE *Sufjan Stevens, Boards Of Canada*

Dan Auerbach

WAITING ON A SONG

Auerbach's second solo album isn't really anything like 2009's *Keep It Hid*. Instead, *Waiting On A Song* sees him mining a fresh seam of interests. The result is a feelgood "love letter to Nashville", featuring seven co-writes with Music City legend John Prine. Duane Eddy adds his twang to a number of cuts, and even Mark Knopfler beams in some picking on *Shine On Me*. Auerbach is clearly having fun, and his talents as a vocalist, guitarist, songwriter and producer shine through. So long as you don't expect Black Keys edge, you'll find a song here to soundtrack your summer. **CM**

7/10

TRY IF YOU LIKE *Paul Simon, George Harrison*

Hank Marvin

WITHOUT A WORD

Looking at the track listing for Hank Marvin's 17th solo album, you might wonder if this is a joke – covers of *Doctor Who* and *Poirot*?! But yes indeed, that's where Hank and his menagerie of MIDI instruments has gone on *Without A Word*. And for Hankophiles, there's of course a bountiful supply of iconic Strat lines throughout, including an accordion-tinged take on Michelle and the original track, *Russian Doll*, which features some interesting acoustic and electric interplay. For the rest of us, however, it might just be a bit too lift-music-y to really enjoy. **GJ**

6/10

TRY IF YOU LIKE *The Shadows, The Ventures*

Joe Bonamassa

LIVE AT CARNEGIE HALL: AN ACOUSTIC EVENING

'How do you get to Carnegie Hall?' goes the old joke. 'Practice' is no stranger to JoBo, of course, but this gig finds him out of his regular pattern, turning 14 of his songs into soulful, rootsy acoustic numbers with the help of a nine-piece backing band. There's no place to hide with acoustic, but Joe as ever translates his electric stylings with aplomb, whether its the driving slide blues of *Black Lung Heartache* or the blazing runs of *Drive*. Another welcome opportunity for guitar aficionados to appreciate his extraordinary talent in a more stripped down form. **GJ**

8/10

TRY IF YOU LIKE *Eric Clapton, Gary Moore*

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DOYLE BRAHMALL II

"My Spinal Tap moment..."

The guitarist and producer on healthy snacks, unfortunate gum incidents, and the music of the universe...

1 I couldn't live without my...
"I'm not that attached to things really, but it would a bad day if my 1964 Stratocaster was lost. It has the best tone and feel of any Strat I've ever played. The neck is small in width and the fretboard circumference is at about a 10-inch radius, so it's very easy to bend across the neck which left handed upside down players seem to like to do a lot."

2 In another life I would be...
"I would probably be a Sufi musician, nomadic Baba , International Banya Aficionado or a Shaman in the Amazon. It's all I crave when I'm not touring myself. I love immersing myself into different cultures through the experience of music."

3 The moment it all started...
"24 December 1968. I was born into a musical family and was playing music by age five. It was my calling for sure. It was an immediate immersion into music."

4 The one that got away...
"There was a 50s Telecaster: the first left-handed Fender guitar ever made. I skipped buying it for nine grand and then saw it in a coffee table book a year later listed as one of the most rare guitars in history valued at a million dollars."

5 My Spinal Tap moment...
"I was playing with the Thunderbirds in front of thousands of people, the wind blew my hair into my mouth while I was chewing gum. It's real cool having to gnaw through a hair/gum cluster to get it out while playing a solo..."

6 The best advice I've ever been given...
"A musician friend encouraging me to be a producer. It changed the trajectory of my career."

7 The first thing I play when I pick up a guitar...
"Whatever is in my head that day or whatever I'm feeling."

8 The most important thing on my rider...
"I usually get my own stuff at health food stores and carry it around with me. I don't like the double dipping, nor the Spinal Tap finger sandwich aspect. I need some quality!"

9 My guilty pleasure...
"I don't really have a guilty pleasure. I'm pretty finicky musically. I don't have a modern pop band that I secretly like. I do spinning from time to time, and I try to pedal to the music in the class without getting annoyed. Does that count?"

10 If I could learn to play one thing...
"Bach maybe. I've been asked that before and it seems like an unanswerable question for me. Music has as many variations of sound and emotive qualities as life does. There isn't one piece of music that would sum it all up for me. I think the sound of nature would be my choice of music. The music of the universe is enough for me."

Photo by Jordan Curtis Hughes

Stand Out in the Crowd

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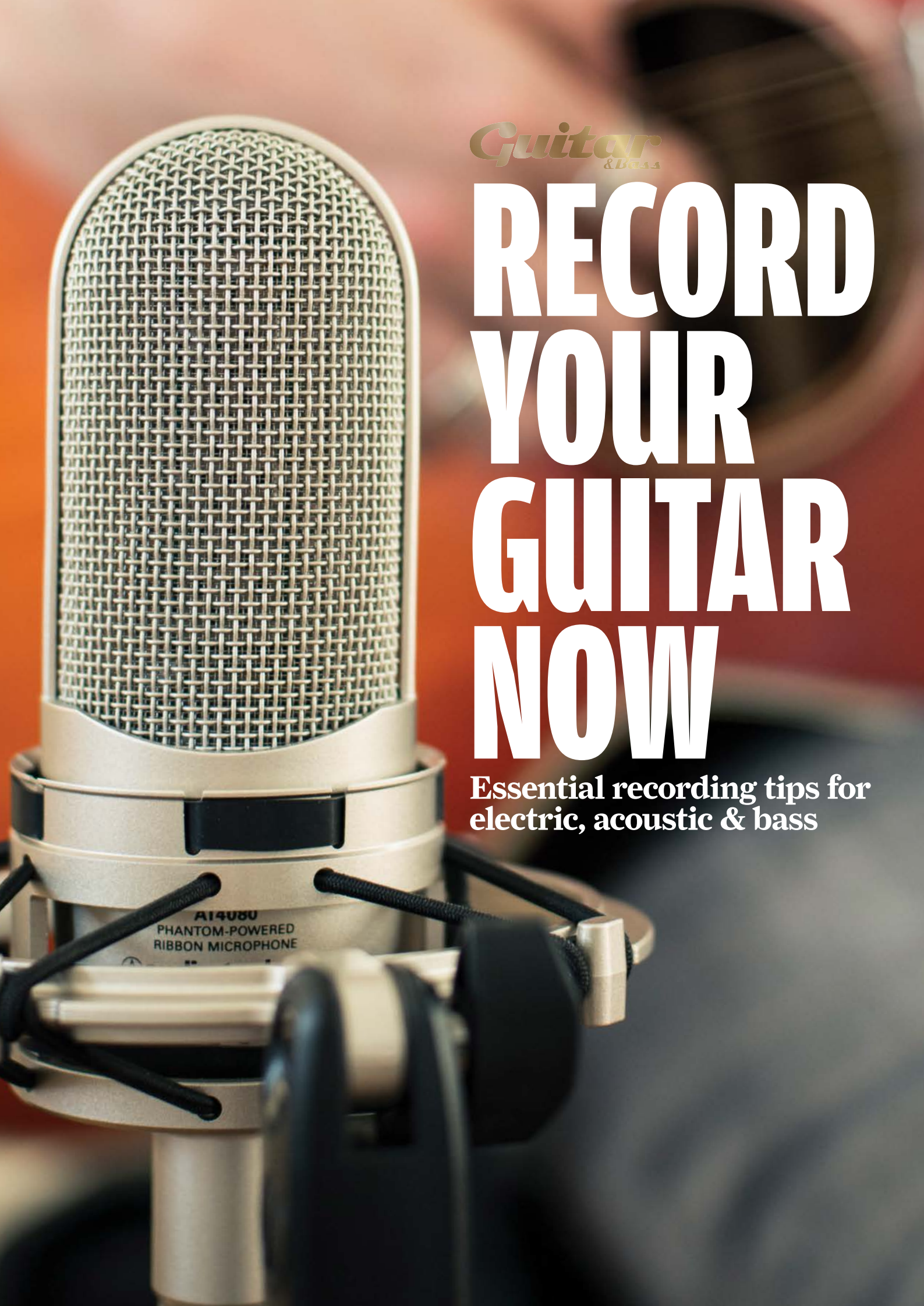

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WELCOME

RECORD YOUR GUITAR NOW

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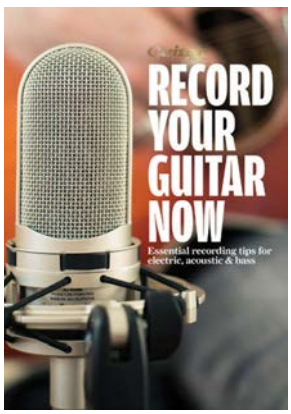

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RECORD BETTER ELECTRIC GUITAR

Stop wasting those song ideas and start recording today with our guide to getting your electric guitar sounds right in the studio

Words **John Pickford**

Have you ever wanted to record your own music but you're not sure where to start? Don't worry, you're not on your own – everyone feels that way at the beginning, but we're here to help. From which amp (if any) you should use, to tracking, mic-placement, and when to add effects, our guide will get you recording better electric guitar in no time...

Your basic sound

Electric guitars are capable of producing a multitude of different sounds, ranging from the purest cleans right through to saturated distortion and feedback. Many factors influence the final recorded sound; the type of guitar and amp, and any stompbox or rack-mounted effects used will shape the initial tone. The choice of microphone(s) and mic'ing techniques, too, along with any studio processing, will also contribute to the end result. Your playing style is also crucial; experiment by playing with fingers or a variety of plectrum gauges until you get the right attack. While most guitarists play with a pick, coins can also be used to produce interesting harmonic overtones – just ask Brian May or Billy Gibbons.

Choosing the right guitar

While the combination of your guitar, amp, effects and technique all play a crucial role in achieving the desired tone, it's important that you choose the right guitar for the job in the first place. There's a reason why Stratocasters, Telecasters, Les Pauls and ES-335s have featured on so many classic recordings over the years; it's because they are as reliable as they are versatile. That said, don't be afraid to try guitars fitted with more esoteric pickups, such as Gold Foils, for a less generic sound. P-90s are another great studio weapon; less dense than humbuckers, they can provide plenty of rhythm raunch without crowding the mix.

Amplifier types

The amplifier you choose to use will have a huge impact on the sound. Valve amps are still king for most players, but they can often be impractical in home recording scenarios. Though we'd all love to mic up a cranked Marshall Plexi every time a classic-rock sound is required, these days software and hardware modelling is so good that the results are almost indistinguishable from the 'real thing' in a finished mix. Though pricey, the Kemper Profiling Amp and Fractal Audio Axe-Fx produce seriously realistic results, while almost as impressive are software solutions such as IK Multimedia's AmpliTube and Guitar Rig from Native Instruments. If you are recording on a Mac or iPad using GarageBand, don't discount the built-in amp and pedal simulations either.

Amplifier size

The size and power rating of the amp, as well as the size and type of the speakers within the cabinet, will have a significant impact on the recorded sound you get. Obviously, huge stacks will produce a very different sound from small combos. That said, many recording engineers have found that a small, low-powered amp cranked right up can sound more exciting than a big powerhouse. Even cheap transistor amps with tiny speakers can sound great in the right context. Don't be precious and don't rule anything out; it's all about the end result!

Listen close

Before deciding on how to go about mic'ing the amp, listen to the sound in the room. If the guitar is being recorded as part of a rhythm track in the same room as drums and other instruments, the only option may be to use a close-mic'ing technique, unless you don't mind dealing with the other instruments bleeding into the guitar track. Recording guitars in isolation, as an overdub, presents more options for ambient room mic'ing. Experiment with mic positioning to achieve the right amount of room sound and the desired bass and treble response. Distance-mic'ing in a very live-sounding room can create an appealing slapback echo-type sound, while close mic'ing gives you absolute flexibility in the mix.

Basic mic'ing

For many engineers, a simple one-mic technique gives them all the recorded electric guitar sound they need. Dynamic types, such as the ubiquitous Shure SM57, are ideal for >

Most engineers prefer a simple one-mic technique for recording electrics

capturing loud sounds, as they can handle high SPLs. For a more accurate representation of the amp as your ear hears it in the room, a condenser or ribbon mic can be employed, although care must be taken not to damage the mic with very loud signals. Pointing the mic at the centre of the speaker cone produces the brightest sound, with the sound becoming increasingly warm the further off-centre it's placed. It's common to position the mic quite close to the speaker grille, unless you want a degree of room sound. A good starting point is to place the mic just off-centre, at a distance of between two and six inches.

Multi-mic'ing

Additional mics can be used to capture different tones from the amp and/or some ambient room sound. When recording open-backed cabinets, great results can be obtained by using a second mic at the rear of the cab. When this technique is employed, it's wise to invert the phase on one of the channels. To create a sound that's larger than life, try recording a part with close and distant mics and pan the two channels, then repeat the process, panning the channels in the opposite direction. Two close mics pointing at different parts of the speaker – one dead-centre and the other towards the far edge – will pick up the full range of the speaker's tone.

Additional mics can be used to capture different tones from the amp and/or some ambient room sound

Multi-amping

Another way of creating a huge sound is to split the signal from the guitar – most easily achieved via a stompbox with stereo outputs – and send it to two or more amps. All sorts of combinations of sound can be achieved, especially when panning techniques are employed. Of course, each amp can also be multi-mic'd if desired, and some truly three-dimensional results can be obtained. Different effects can be applied to the various amps, while using combinations of clean and dirty amp sounds can be really effective for delivering overdrive with definition, or grit and sparkle simultaneously.

DI boxes

Traditionally, the vast majority of professional engineers prefer to record electric guitars through a mic'd up amplifier, rather than use a DI (direct injection) box – even though specialist guitar DI units are readily available these days. That said, there are many practical reasons to split the signal from the guitar and use a DI box in conjunction with an amp. If you find out later that the recorded amp sound doesn't work in the final mix, or that you wish you hadn't committed a particular effect 'to tape', the pure guitar sound can be re-amped and subsequently reprocessed without the need to discard a great take. You can route the DI'd signal through a modelling plug-in and blend that with the mic'd amp sound, too.

Amp positioning

Small amps can benefit from being placed on a stand, rather than the floor, as reflections from the floor can muddy the sound. A stool or something similar will do if a stand isn't available. For the same reason, when using

larger stacks or combos with several speakers, try mic'ing one that's furthest from the floor. Placing an amp against a wall will increase the bottom-end response, and placing it in a corner will emphasise the low end further still. A mellow tone can be achieved by pointing the amp into the corner and mic'ing from behind.

Player positioning

In many studios, the guitarist can play in the control room while the amp is mic'd up in the live room. It feels less natural at first, but this way, you can more accurately monitor how your guitar sits in the mix through the studio monitors while you track. Some players prefer to be in the same room as their amp for reasons of feel and response, but if you are using a hollowbody or pickups that are susceptible to microphony, separating the guitar and amp can help. Of course, if feedback is desirable, you are better off in the room with the amp.

String mic'ing

Setting up a mic to record the natural acoustic sound of the guitar strings can add percussive character when blended with the amp sound, especially if you are capturing old-school archtop sounds. For best results, the guitar needs to be isolated from the amp to prevent excessive bleed. This technique gives a good front-end attack to the sound and plenty of definition. A small condenser is the best mic for the job, and it's worth using a high-pass filter as well.

(Don't) bring the noise

Before recording commences, make sure that all of your equipment is in good shape and not producing crackles, hums and buzzes. If you are having problems, they can often be dealt with by using noise-filtering units such as gates and expanders. These are best used before post-recording effects – compression and reverb, for example – are applied, as a compressor will emphasise noise, while a gate might chop off the natural tail of the reverb.

Strings and cables

Just as it's important that the guitar, amp and effects are performing to spec, make sure that all cables are functioning properly (it's uncanny how many times a lead that was working fine yesterday suddenly develops a fault just before a take). It's a good idea to ensure that spares are available. That goes for strings, too – valuable recording time can be lost just because a string has broken and no one has a spare. Some engineers will try to insist you use brand new strings when recording, but don't be bullied into it if you prefer the warmer sound of a played-in set; that applies especially to bass, as new bass strings can introduce undesirable harmonic content into the sound, but more on that later!

Pickup position

Many guitarists with instruments that have more than one pickup spend most of their time on the bridge unit. Using a variety of pickup positions when recording will thin or fatten the sound as required, but also help free up space when it comes to the mixing stage. Think of a recorded mix as a layer cake; too much density in one frequency range will cause a headache for the mixing engineer.

Go active

Active pickups feature a preamp to boost the signal before it's sent to the guitar amp, and therefore require power – usually from a nine-volt battery. The benefits of using active pickups are that they have a much higher output than passive types, and better noise-rejection than humbuckers.

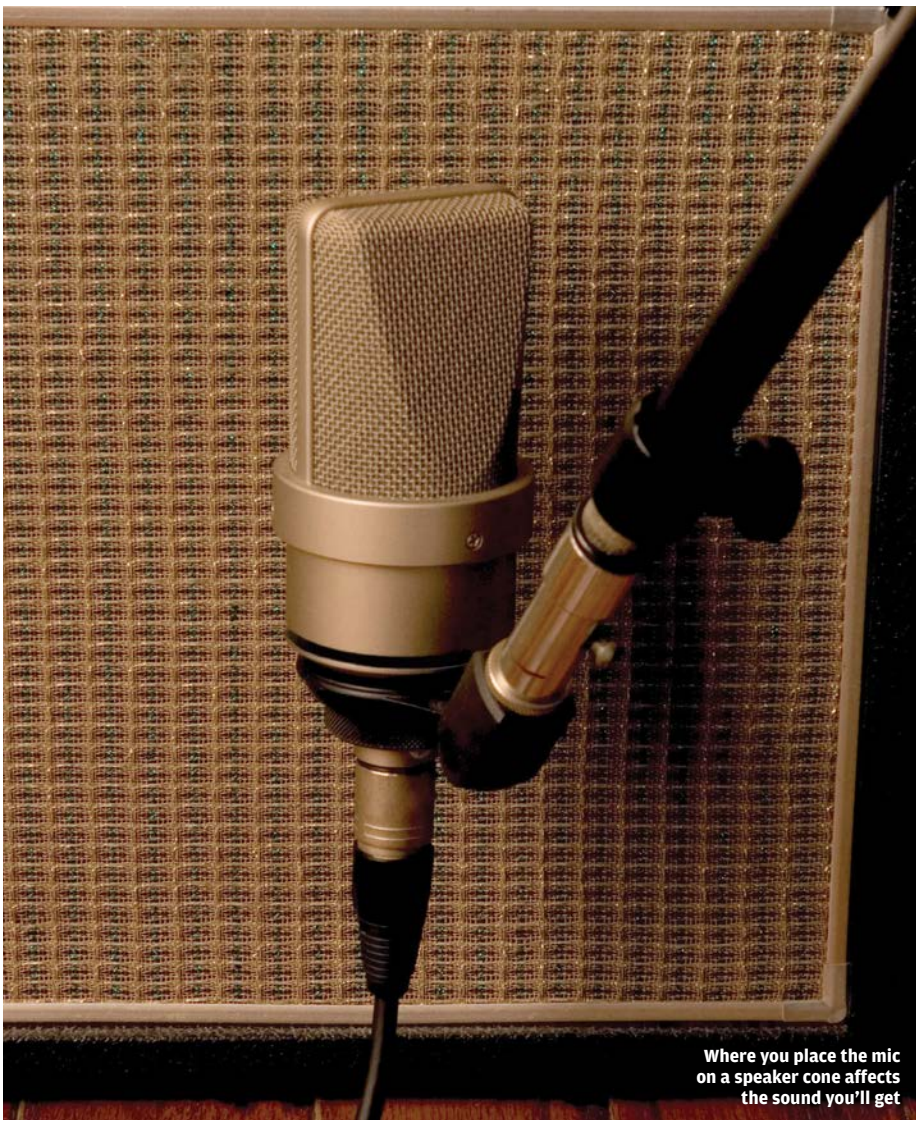
Guitar EQ

Although electric guitar sounds vary dramatically, they are all essentially midrange instruments with little or no extreme high- and low-end information. With the tone controls on the amp and the guitar itself, recorded electric guitar sounds often need

Choosing the right guitar is the key to good recorded sound

Double-tracking your guitars can give you a thicker sound

Use an amp that can be turned up to its sweet spot in the space you're recording in



Where you place the mic on a speaker cone affects the sound you'll get

little in the way of EQ if the desired tone was produced at the recording stage. However, if the sound needs a bit more bite, try boosting the upper mids somewhere between 2.5 and 5kHz. For added warmth, a little boost around the 250Hz range should thicken the sound, while muddiness is often dealt with by cutting a few dBs at around the 200Hz mark.

Filters

A very useful way of creating space for guitars in the final mix is to use tunable high-pass and low-pass filters to remove extreme frequencies that do nothing to enhance the guitar tone, but invade the space of other instruments that do perform in those areas. Generally speaking, it's worth losing everything below 80Hz, although it's not unusual to set the filter a good degree higher. Shaving off some high end may also be useful to help place the guitar in a specific area of the audio spectrum. Filter at the mixing stage, as the sound of the recording will often determine the optimum filtering points.

Multi-tracking guitars

Many recordings feature multiple guitar tracks playing simultaneously, but sometimes this can clutter up the mix. Another approach is to make each part sound distinctive by using different combinations of guitars, amps and effects. Panning the guitars to various areas of the stereo spectrum will create space for each part, while subtle use of ambient effects can create a sense of depth. EQ can be used to help your guitars blend together. Try cutting certain frequencies from one guitar track and then boosting those same frequencies in another.

Compression

Compressors are often applied to electric guitar tracks to bring out the guitar's natural sustain, as well as even out the overall dynamic range. Lead guitar parts usually benefit from a degree of compression treatment, while heavily overdriven rhythm parts often require very little or none at all, as the distortion naturally provides its own type of dynamic control. In the case of unnatural sounds, such as electric guitar, compression becomes a highly subjective topic, so experimentation is key to achieving the desired effect. As a starting point, therefore, try medium-fast attack and release times – an extremely fast attack time will blunt the transient response of the note. Remember that electric guitars can be inherently noisy and compression will generally exaggerate any hums and buzzes.

Double-tracking

To create a thicker rhythm guitar sound, overdub the same part one or more times. Depending on the desired effect, the overdub can be treated as one mono signal and mixed

If your effects are integral to the desired sound, then you are 'playing' the effect as much as you are the instrument

to the same stereo position, or panned left and right for a stereo double-tracked sound. Alternatively, treat the original track with an ADT (Artificial Double Tracking) effect. This can be done with a digital delay set to around 40 milliseconds. Again, the delayed signal can be panned or mixed as one with the original guitar track.

Stereo guitars

Aside from the stereo effect of doubling up the same part and panning it to opposite ends of the stereo spectrum, some guitarists use stereo rigs in conjunction with stereo effects. Traditionally, this involves using two cabinets, although single cabs that operate in stereo are available. To achieve a good, even stereo image, it's best to mic each cab identically, ideally with the same type of mic. Invert the polarity of one of the channels to avoid any out-of-phase issues, and pan them hard left and right. Stereo effects such as reverb, delay and room ambience, can be added to mono guitar signals at the mixing stage.

Electro-acoustic guitars

Acoustic guitars that have been fitted with a pickup can be recorded using the same techniques as standard electric guitars when plugged into an amp. Interesting sounds can be created by mic'ing up an acoustic guitar and sending the sound through an amp. This can be done live – although you should be aware of feedback – or a previously recorded acoustic track can be re-amped and used exclusively, or mixed with the original acoustic track. You can get some really gnarly and original 'electric' sounds with creative use of overdriven acoustic guitar; it's especially good for slide playing.

Effects

On entering a studio, some guitarists ask if they should leave off the effects they normally use and add them in later. Of course, this can be done; however, if the effects are integral to the desired sound and you are 'playing' the effect as much as you are the instrument – fuzzboxes, heavy spring reverb, long delays and so on – it might be difficult to create the right feel during the take without them. If there is uncertainty as to whether the effects are spot-on, split the signal to retain the option of reworking the sound during the mixing process.

Isolation and ISO boxes

Separation and spillage are two words that are always at the forefront of a recording engineer's mind, although some more old-school producers are happy to 'let it bleed'. Electric guitars, basses and drums are loud instruments that can bleed into each other's mics when played in the same room. Not everyone has the luxury of drum booths and separate rooms, but isolation boxes are great for isolating guitars during a rhythm track recording. They are also ideal for home recording, allowing a good volume level without disturbing neighbours. Isolation boxes are commercially available, but can be expensive; try making your own from wood and foam.

RECORD BETTER ACOUSTIC GUITAR

Capturing the essence of the humble acoustic guitar can be a tricky task, but our guide will make a record producer out of you in no time...

Words **John Pickford**

Life would be a lot simpler if there was one perfect method of recording acoustic guitar that everybody agreed with. However, if you ask 10 engineers to name their favourite technique, you'll likely get 10 completely different answers. Some engineers only ever use a single microphone to capture the sound, while others prefer to blend the sound of two or more mics.

The best engineers understand the benefits and pitfalls of a number of techniques and adapt their mic'ing approach to suit the job in hand. In this tutorial, we'll look at how to get set up along with tips on how to produce great results from using one microphone to capture the whole sound.

Tools for the job

Acoustic guitars come in a wide range of flavours, ranging from the warm, mellow tones of nylon-strung classical and Spanish guitars to the strident, metallic sound of resonator types, such as Dobros; the full-bodied folksy vibe of a dreadnought to the distinctive sprightly tone of a gypsy jazz guitar. And then, of course, there are 12-strings... Thankfully, no matter what style of acoustic guitar is used, the methods employed to record it remain the same. Of course, you won't be able to make a classical guitar sound like a resonator with recording techniques, so it's very important to make sure that you choose the right instrument for the job in the first place.

Prior to the session, it's worth checking that the guitar is in the best possible condition. The age of the strings will affect the tone, and be aware that the gauge used will make quite a big contribution to the sound: light-gauge strings will produce a thinner tone than heavy ones. Also, the type of plectrum (if used) will influence the final result: a thinner one providing more percussive energy from the strumming, and a thicker one generating more volume thanks to its heavier attack.

Once the guitar is in optimum condition, listen to how it sounds in the room, as it's the way the instrument interacts with the recording environment that has one of the most profound effects on the sound. Unlike vocals, that are best captured with as little >

Different acoustic guitar body shapes will give a dramatically different sound – experiment!

room ambience as possible, acoustic guitars positively benefit from the natural reverb of a good recording room. Generally, a reasonably lively room with wooden floors will give the best results. Also, try different rooms, as you may find that the guitar actually sounds best in the kitchen!

Setting up and selecting mics

Different shapes and makes of acoustic guitars can sound dramatically different, so make sure you have one that suits the track. Sort out any rattles and buzzes, and ensure that the player's jewellery or clothing – shirt buttons, for example – are not causing unwanted noise by knocking against the instrument. Discard tired, dull-sounding strings, but be aware that brand-new strings may emphasise 'finger screech'. Coated strings and lubricants can help tame this.

Start by making sure the guitar sounds good in the room. If your recording room is small, boxy and dry-sounding, try another room. Alternatively, increase ambience by removing soft furnishings and adding some reflective surfaces. A handy trick in heavily carpeted rooms is to place a sheet of hardboard or something similar beneath the player in order to pick up some reflections from the floor. When all else fails, add some artificial room ambience during processing.

> The most common mistake made by novice engineers is to point the mic straight at the soundhole

Use a condenser mic, if possible, to capture the high-frequency detail and harmonics. Mics with switchable polar patterns are ideal, as omnidirectional or figure of eight (bi-directional) settings offer more natural ambience and avoid the low-end boom often caused by the proximity effect when using a cardioid setting. If you only have cardioid mics, choose the brightest-sounding one and position it at a distance that avoids excessive bass and captures some room ambience.

Tone on the range

With the guitar sounding great in the recording environment, it's time to think about the best way of capturing the sound. Most engineers choose condenser mics to record acoustic guitars, as they are often more flattering than dynamic types. Opinions differ as to whether a large- or small-diaphragm condenser is preferred; however, the sound of the instrument and the role it will play in the final mix should influence the choice to a greater degree. Even with the best EQ and compression, a midrange-y parlour guitar will just not cut it if your track requires a bass-y jumbo-style sound.

Large diaphragms tend to have a fatter, full-bodied sound, which is often desirable if the guitar is a featured instrument, as you would hear in, say, a solo singer/songwriter performance. Small diaphragm mics are usually favoured for their exceptionally detailed top-end response, which is useful to help the guitar cut through a busy mix. That's not to say that dynamic mics are completely unsuitable, though, as a well-positioned dynamic mic will sound better than an expensive but poorly placed condenser. Ribbon mics (which are a type of dynamic microphone) can sound gorgeous on an acoustic guitar, as they often sound big

and warm but still capture the delicacy and detail of the sound. Also, the bi-directional response of ribbons picks up a decent amount of natural room ambience. Now, not all of us have the luxury of choosing any mic that takes our fancy, but as indicated above, an inexpensive and carefully positioned mic should produce satisfying results.

Positioning your microphone

Listen to the sound that your guitar produces by moving your head around in front of the instrument (while someone else is playing it, obviously!). You will hear the sound change quite significantly from one position to another. The sound should become lighter as you move away from the body and towards the neck of the guitar. Try to find a spot that captures a full, resonant tone without excessive boominess, while also picking up the detail of the strings being plucked and strummed.

Once you have set up a microphone, put on some headphones with a feed of the signal and sweep the mic around, moving along the guitar at various distances and heights to find the best sound. Make sure the headphone level is sufficient to block-out the ambient sound of the instrument without being deafeningly loud.

Better still, if you have someone to assist you, get them to sweep the mic around while you audition the sound on your monitors.

As a starting point that is favoured by many engineers, position the mic at the place where the guitar's neck joins the body. Experiment with distance to achieve a good balance of direct sound and room ambience, and also try some less obvious positions such as placing the mic at the player's shoulder level.

Sound decisions

The most common mistake made by novice engineers is to point the mic straight at the soundhole. Sure, it looks like the right thing to do, but this position often exaggerates any low-end boom, that could clutter up your mix.

It's far better to find a position that picks up a more even balance of the instrument's sound. Remember, an acoustic guitar's sound is made up of several elements: resonances from the soundhole, wooden panels and internal bracing, as well as the sound of the strings, so finding a spot that captures a larger slice of the complete sound is best.

Aim to find a position that offers a decent overview of the guitar's sound without too much unwanted low-end information, especially when using a directional mic with a fixed cardioid polar pattern. If you have a mic with an omnidirectional pick-up pattern you can afford to move in a little closer if desired, as the low-end boost caused by the proximity effect of directional mics isn't an issue.

Also, an omni mic will capture a nice, even amount of room sound. One problem with this mic position is that with some instruments the sound can lack body, which can be an issue if the guitar is a main part of the recording.

If, however, the guitar forms part of a busy mix, the thinner sound can be positively advantageous, particularly if you want the rhythmic strumming of the strings to cut through without too much midrange frequency information cluttering up the production. Another problem can arise from unwanted noises, either from the player's fingers sliding along the strings, or annoying fret buzzes. A good solution to this problem is to position the mic away from the neck and further along the body towards the bridge.

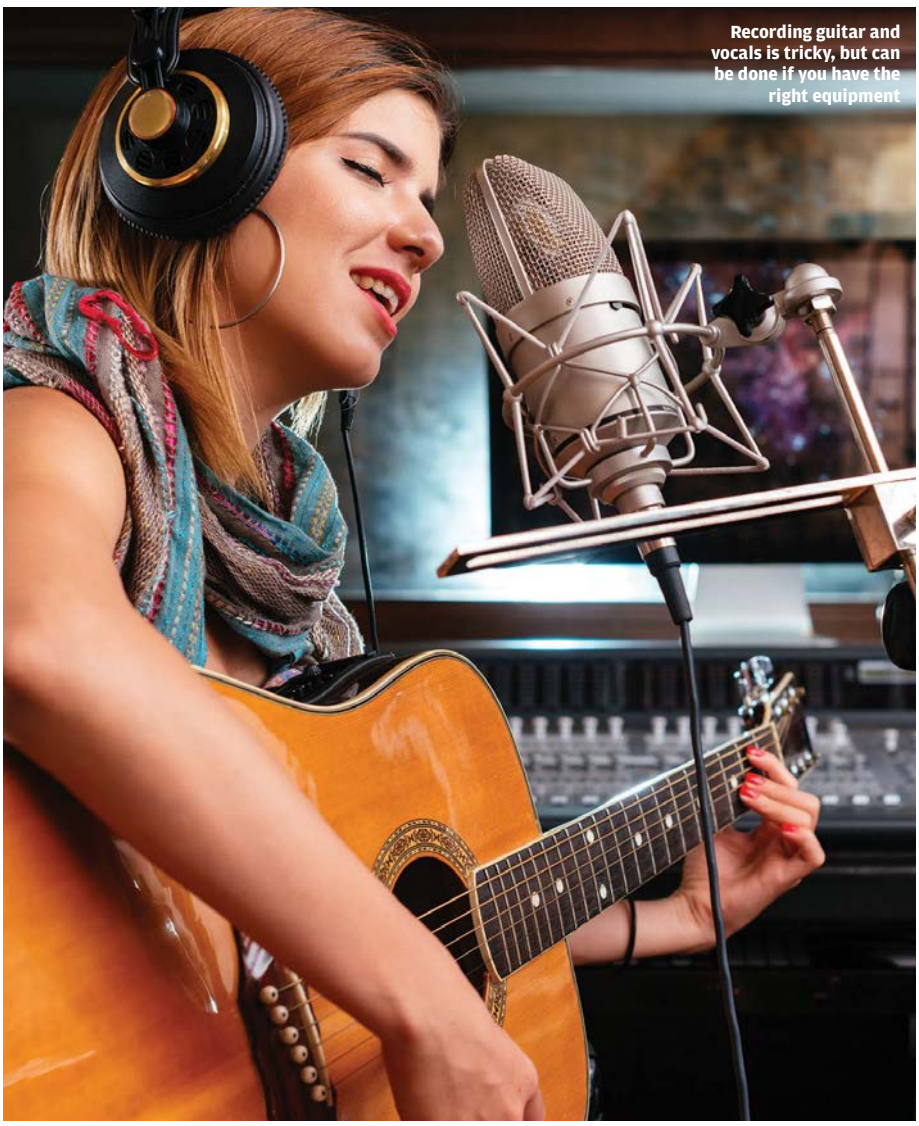
For a more full-bodied tone, experiment with positions that have the microphone placed above the sound-hole, angled downwards – this position is excellent for capturing a well-rounded sound while avoiding the blast of air emanating from the soundhole.

If the guitar you're recording is an electro-acoustic then you can DI it onto a separate channel (preferably through a preamp first to add warmth) and then blend it in later (if required) to thicken the sound. Granted, we're meant to be talking about recording with just one mic here, but as this is a pickup we can get away with it!.

Multiple mics

Now, it's time to delve deeper and discover how multi-mic'ing can offer a wider variety of tonal options. Don't be fooled, though, it's no good throwing up several randomly placed mics and hoping for the best, you still need to think about and – crucially – listen to the sound of the instrument before deciding where the best sounds will be captured. Points mentioned previously, such as the quality of the recording environment, condition of the instrument and an understanding of whereabouts on the guitar various tones can be captured are still relevant and should be used as a good starting point before extra mics are brought into play. As we shall see, using more than one mic – or a combination of a microphone and a DI output can present its own problems as well as offering you some more flexibility.

Acoustic treatment can be used to reduce unwanted reflections but the ambience of a good room can be desirable, too



Recording guitar and vocals is tricky, but can be done if you have the right equipment

There are two main reasons why we might want to use two or more mics to record acoustic guitar. Firstly, microphones can be placed at wildly different-sounding parts of the guitar to achieve a coherent blend. With just one mic, the chosen position must capture a fairly broad range of the tones that the instrument is capable of. However, using two mics, for example, one could be positioned near the bridge where the sound is full-bodied but might lack top-end detail, and a second mic could be placed facing the neck, capturing a bright, detailed sound that would probably be too thin to be used alone.

Secondly, two or more mics offer the possibility of stereo recording. When using multi-mic techniques to create a mono signal (which can later be panned anywhere in the stereo picture), there are several ways of going about it to achieve the desired effect.

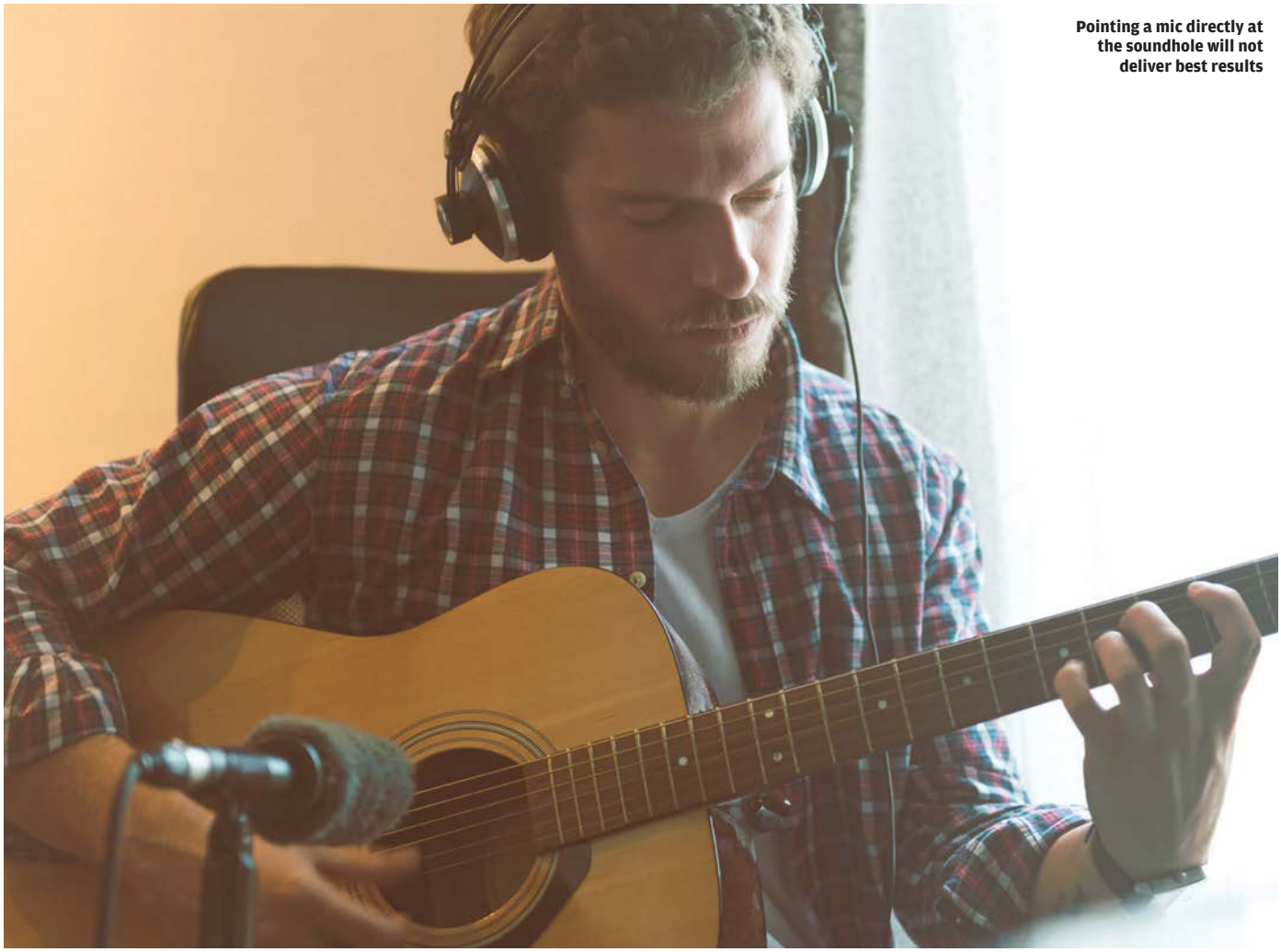
Getting your spacing right

Listen to the sound of your main microphone. If it lacks body, try adding a mic pointing at the guitar's body just beyond the bridge. When more top-end clarity is needed, a mic near the headstock, pointing at the strings will add some treble detail. When recorded onto two or more tracks, these mics can be subtly panned to create cool stereo effects. Extreme panning will produce an unnaturally wide sound that may sound unconvincing.

Rather than using one mic in the sweet spot, try using a vertical-spaced pair. The mics should be placed around 20cm apart on the vertical plane, with the top mic angled downwards to pick up the low-end while the bottom mic is pointed up to capture more high-frequency information. Again, judicious stereo panning can produce useful spacial effects. This technique can sound good when making solo voice and guitar recordings.

When recording acoustic guitar and vocals simultaneously, try using two bi-directional (figure 8) mics – one each for voice and guitar – to get good separation. The mics should be positioned so that the null side of each mic is aimed at the unwanted sound source. Figure 8 mics are remarkably deaf to sounds appearing at the sides, and a surprising degree of separation can be achieved. This is useful if you need to add effects or treat one channel without affecting the other.

As previously mentioned, mics can be used to pick up contrasting tones that would be practically useless used on their own, but sound great when mixed together. However, another method is to try to get the best overall sound from the first mic – as you would when using single mic techniques – then embellish the sound with a second mic that emphasises certain aspects of the guitar's tone that the first mic is lacking. For example, if your first mic is in the sweet spot (the classic 12th-fret position is often a good starting point) but lacks body, a second mic could be placed



Pointing a mic directly at the soundhole will not deliver best results

Mics can be used to pick up contrasting tones that would be useless on their own, but sound great when mixed together

where more bottom-heavy tones are heard – near the bridge of the guitar, behind the instrument or even close to the soundhole.

Similarly, if the first microphone is missing some high-frequency information, a second mic positioned somewhere further up the fretboard towards the headstock might produce a more natural tone than adding some top-end EQ to the main microphone.

Another reason for using more than one mic is to capture some of the recording room's natural reverb. Again, the main mic should capture a good overall guitar sound while another mic, placed at a distance, will add ambience and life. Of course, the techniques already mentioned can be used simultaneously, so that you have a couple of close mics capturing the broad tone of the instrument while a third mic picks up the room sound; two spaced room mics can produce a very good stereo effect. As always when using multi-mic set-ups, check the phase relationship between microphones by inverting the polarity of one channel; if the sound becomes fuller and more focused, use that configuration.

Recording acoustic guitar in stereo can give excellent results, particularly when it's a featured instrument in a predominantly acoustic track. There are several techniques that can be employed for this, but a detailed study of stereo recording is beyond the scope of this article. That said, the mid/side method – explained in the following section – is worth trying as it can produce a very natural and convincing stereo image.

Stereo phonics

There are several ways of capturing acoustic guitar in stereo. A spaced pair or employing the X-Y method can give excellent results, while a mono acoustic guitar recording can be treated to a touch of stereo ambience at the mixing stage. However, the mid/side (M/S) technique is a superb method that avoids many phasing issues and is completely mono-compatible. For this, you will need to use two mics, one of which must be bi-directional, and three channels on your mixer.

The first (mid) microphone should be set to either cardioid or omni-directional – omni often works better with acoustic guitar. Place this mic in your chosen sweet spot. Take your bi-directional mic and place it so that it sits either beneath or above the mid mic, with the capsules as close as possible. A piece of double-sided tape to join the mics is useful here. This mic should be positioned so that the null side is pointing towards the guitar.

The signal from the bi-directional mic must be split and sent to another channel. Invert the polarity of this channel and pan each of the bi-directional channels left and right. Adjusting the levels between the side channels and the mid channel will determine the width of the image. If the recording is mono, the side channels will cancel each other out, leaving a mono image without any phasing issues.

Often, when musicians request 'stereo' acoustic guitar, they actually mean two separate mono guitars playing the same part, panned left and right. This double-

Most engineers prefer to mic acoustics, but if you have a decent electro, you can go direct

tracking method can sound really good in many rock/pop recordings, helping to create a sense of width and space. Some engineers like to create two almost identical recordings, using the same mic in the same position on the same guitar. However, it's worth experimenting with different mics and positions – even different guitars – to determine what works best for the song.

Some acoustic guitars have pickups fitted, enabling the instrument to be DI'd or plugged into an amplifier (effectively turning it into a semi-acoustic guitar). Most engineers prefer to use microphones rather than a DI out when recording acoustic instruments, but sometimes a blend of microphone and DI signals can produce good results. Just remember that the DI signal will hit your recorder slightly before the mic signal, which can cause issues with phase.

Multi-tasking

So far, we have assumed that the acoustic guitar is being recorded in isolation – it can be tricky getting a really good sound if it's being played in a small space, along with loud drums and amplified sounds. That said, many singer/songwriters like to lay down their guitar and vocal tracks simultaneously. A good trick here is to use a bi-directional (figure 8) polar pattern with both the vocal and guitar mic. Bi-directional microphones are extremely effective at rejecting sound that arrives from the sides, so if each mic is positioned so that the null side points towards the unwanted sound, good separation can be achieved.

Well-recorded acoustic guitars generally don't require too much in the way of processing if a natural sound is desired

Fix it in post

Well-recorded acoustic guitars generally don't require too much in the way of processing, if a natural sound is desired. However, when it forms part of a busy mix, a certain amount of low-end attenuation can help the guitar sit in the track, creating space for bass instruments. At the recording stage, a high-pass-filter on either the mic or preamp can be engaged, helping to eliminate boom; when mixing, a low-end shelving EQ is the best option.

Many acoustic guitar tracks benefit from a touch of top-end boost to generate a bit of sparkle. Anything from 10kHz upwards will add some zing, but a healthy boost around 16kHz can add a lovely sense of air and space.

Talking of space, a touch of reverb often sounds nice on acoustic guitars, particularly if they've been recorded with very little room ambience present; the length of the reverb will be determined by the nature and tempo of the song. A little compression can help frantically-strummed rhythm guitars sit in the mix if the compressor is well set-up to respond to the tempo of the track. Excessive pick sounds can be tamed by using a very fast attack time to dull the presence of the plectrum.

Acoustic guitars feature in all sorts of recordings in any number of styles, ranging from solo singer/songwriter performances where it is the main accompaniment, to complex mixes where it provides a rhythmic bedrock. Experimenting with the techniques explained here should allow you to make professional-sounding acoustic guitar recordings with confidence.

PHANTOM-POWERED
RIBBON MICROPHONE

RECORD BETTER BASS GUITAR

The bass will probably be the bedrock of any track you record, so getting it to sound good is essential – *G&B* shows you how...

Words **John Pickford**

Whatever kind of music you're recording, chances are that the bassline is going to be the backbone around which the rest of the track will be built. Here are some tips and tricks to get your bass sound on point...

Direct or not direct?

Getting a good bass sound is integral to the success of any piece of recorded music – whether it's deep, dub bass in reggae or the bright, punchy slap tones of funk – and all manner of other genres. No matter what style you're recording, the bass guitar should provide a solid foundation for your track and – along with other elements of the rhythm section – define its groove. There are several ways of recording bass, the most popular being DI – directly injecting the instrument to your recorder; there's also mic'ing an amp/cab and, as many engineers like to do, combining a blend of DI and microphone signals

One thing to consider is whether the bass is to be recorded simultaneously with other elements, such as drums and guitars, or performed as an overdub. If you're recording other instruments in the same room as an amplified bass, it's likely that there will be a certain amount of spill. This is fine as long as the leakage isn't going to adversely affect any future processing during the mixing stage, and some bands thrive on creating a live groove in the studio. However, adopting the DI approach can both avoid spill and open up options later on in the recording process.

Some bass guitars have active pickups, meaning that their output is high enough to be plugged directly into your mixer or interface. However, most basses feature passive pickups, necessitating the use of a DI box to boost the low-level signal. Although bass recorded through a DI can sound tight, dry and clean, it can also lack some of the body and punch that you get from a great-sounding bass cab.

However, when recording a band live in the studio, using a bass DI not only avoids unwanted spill, it also allows a good drum take (for example) to be saved if the bassist makes a mistake. And if the bass part is played perfectly, but the sound isn't quite right, the clean DI signal can later be fed through an amplifier and mic'd up; this technique is called re-amping. Nowadays, there are many outboard recording channels or channel strips that feature excellent DI inputs. Some of these are based upon vintage console designs, and most feature both EQ and dynamics control, enabling you to achieve superb results without the need for amplification.

Mic'ing cabs

Often, though, to achieve the very best bass tones, only the sound of a mic'd-up bass cab will do. The sound of a good bass amplifier, particularly if it's a valve model, is hard to emulate with DI techniques alone. Most engineers favour either dynamic mics with a strong low-end response, or a large-diaphragm condenser. Ribbon designs can sound great on bass, but are more delicate than other types and don't like to be placed close to sources producing high SPLs.

Microphones designed for bass drums – such as the classic AKG D112 – usually work well on bass guitar, as they generally have a pronounced low-end boost that is flattering to bass signals, and can handle very high SPLs. Don't worry if you don't have one of these, though, as most general-purpose mics, such as the Shure SM57 will do a reasonably good job if positioned correctly.

In later years, Beatles engineer Geoff Emerick often recorded Paul McCartney's bass as an overdub, using an AKG C12 set to figure 8 (bi-directional), placing the mic around four or five feet from the bass cab.

For most recording situations, however, moving the mic between five and 18 inches from the speaker should give you all the tonal options you could ever want – unless you're after a particularly roomy sound. Whereabouts along the plane of the speaker the mic is aimed will also determine the final tone. Pointing the mic at the centre of the speaker cone will give you the punchiest sound, while moving along to the edge of the cone will result in smoother, warmer tones.

If you are using a mic with a cardioid polar pattern, do bear in mind that the closer you place it, the more bottom-end will be heard, due to the proximity effect. This can be used to your advantage if you only have a vocal mic (such as a Shure SM58) at your disposal, as >

Going straight into your recording device can be good if you're recording in a room with others

these mics tend to have an inherent rolled-off low-end response.

Touching cloth?

Unlike electric guitar amps, that can give good-sounding results with a mic almost touching the speaker cloth, bass cabs benefit from having a greater distance between the speaker and the mic. Around five inches is usually the minimum distance to achieve a decent tone, but longer distances can produce excellent results, too – if the recording situation permits.

Re-amping a direct bass signal

Recording bass via DI during a group tracking session can both help avoid excessive bleed onto other mics and allow greater flexibility when mixing. However, bass DI alone lacks the body and drive produced by a decent amplifier. Once the DI'd bass has been recorded, the signal can be sent to a bass amp/cab and re-recorded in isolation. You will then have two channels of clean bass with no spill from drums or other instruments.

The best device to use is a dedicated re-amping box, which can be obtained reasonably inexpensively. These work like a DI box in reverse, matching the recorded DI bass signal to a level that is suitable for the amplifier. Indeed, a passive DI box can be used in reverse. However, a re-amping box will offer a more flexible and hassle-free approach to matching both impedance and signal levels.

> The sound of a good bass amplifier, particularly if it's a valve model, is hard to emulate with DI techniques alone

Simply take the DI bass signal from your recorder and plug into the input of the re-amp box. Connect a microphone to the box and mic up the amp/cab to your satisfaction. The sound of the amplified bass can now be overdubbed onto a separate track. Of course, if you are using plug-in amplifier mods instead of the real thing, the DI sound can be treated in your DAW without the need for a re-amping box or bass amplifier.

Compression techniques

Bass guitars have a wide dynamic range and it's almost always necessary to use some compression. The amount required will depend on the style and technique of the player, but as a rule of thumb, some gentle compression at the recording stage, with a heavier squeeze during mixdown, is a sensible starting point. Try using a 4:1 ratio, and then if the bass part is still too wildly dynamic, try a higher ratio when mixing.

Some bass playing styles, such as slap-bass, feature an occasional very loud note that can be tamed by using a much higher ratio of 10:1 or more to limit the peaks. Using extremely fast attack and decay times is not a good idea when recording bass as the initial transients will be lost and the compressor will struggle with the complex waveforms of bass signals. Instead, set the attack time so that the plucking of the string can be heard – around 50ms should do it – and then set the release time to around 250ms or, if your compressor has an auto release setting, use that.

Before using a compressor, it's worth making sure that the basic tone of the bass is correct as a compressor will emphasise the

main tonal characteristic. Therefore, it's a good idea to make any drastic EQ adjustments before adding compression. If your bass sound needs fattening-up, a boost at around 80Hz often helps. However, experiment with upper-bass and low-mid frequencies (100Hz – 400Hz) to help the bass part bed-in with other elements of the mix such as the kick drum. As bass guitars don't produce much in the way of usable high-frequency information, rolling-off the upper frequencies from around 5kHz will allow space for the treble elements of the track. Similarly, when mixing, the bass guitar will have more room to breathe if a high-pass-filter is applied to other instruments and voices that don't require a lot of low-end energy.

Effect yourself

Using effects with bass isn't nearly as common as with electric guitars but can produce distinctive results. Reverbs and delays should be used with caution as they can smear the bass part and rob the part of punch and drive. Some distortion effects can give bass parts a gritty edge, however the extreme distortion caused by fuzzboxes can reduce the low-end impact of the sound. During the 80s, it was fashionable to use a chorus effect, often with fretless basses, which were in vogue during that era. Try a positioning a foam mute down at the bridge for a thumping 60s flavour.

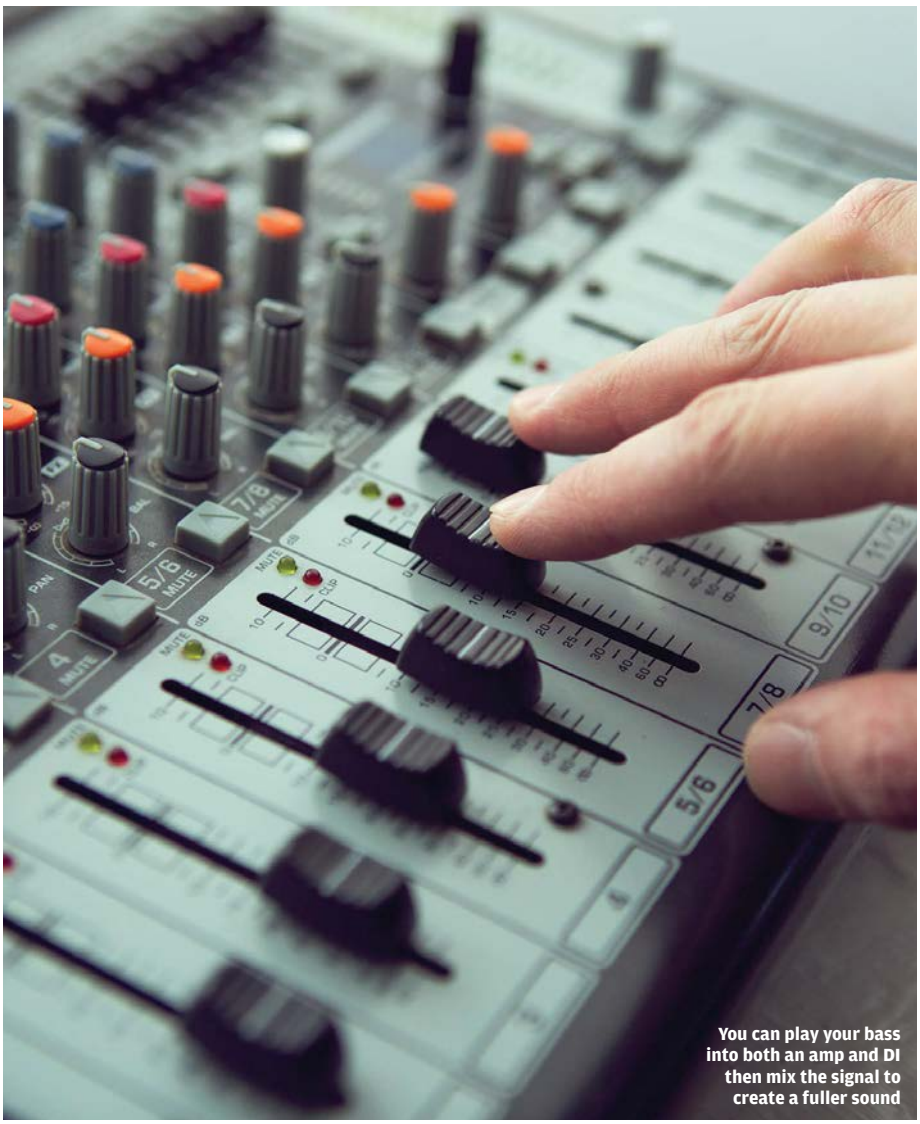
Combining amp and DI

Recording bass both direct and through a bass amp can produce some great results. You get the clean, clear and present sound of the instrument from the direct signal, combined with the warm low end and rich harmonics produced by the speaker cabinet – particularly if you're recording using a valve amp. Be aware, though, that unless the bass guitar has active pickups, you'll need to use a DI (direct injection) box to match impedances and boost the low-level signal from the instrument.

Plug the bass into the instrument (jack) input of the DI box and take a feed from the box into the input of the amp. Use the XLR output on the DI box to connect to your mixer or interface. Once the bass cabinet has been suitably mic'd, you will have two channels of bass. As the signal from the mic enters the recorder a couple of milliseconds later than the DI signal, the sound may become vague when combined, due to phase issues.

To solidify your bass sound, play both channels together and send the DI signal to a digital delay. Dial in the delay (around 2ms is usually about right) until the bass sound snaps into focus. A continuously variable delay is best for this job, so that you can hear precisely when the sound becomes solid and punchy. Alternatively, simply move the DI signal within your digital recorder so that the waveforms match and are not out of phase.

Compression and EQ can help your bass fit in to the mix better



You can play your bass into both an amp and DI then mix the signal to create a fuller sound

Home Recording Essentials

The home recording revolution has made it possible to get pro-level results on a shoestring budget. Here are some great options to get you started...

Focusrite Scarlett 2i2

PRICE £99 **CONTACT** www.focusrite.com

In order to connect to a computer or mobile device for recording, you're going to need an audio interface, and Focusrite makes some of the best affordable options on the market. The Scarlett 2i2 has two dual-purpose XLR/jack inputs with high-quality mic preamps, so you can record two guitars or mics simultaneously. It's compatible with Windows and Mac, comes with Ableton Live, and is housed in an attractive red anodised aluminium chassis.

iRig Pro Duo

PRICE £149 **CONTACT** www.ikmultimedia.com

IK Multimedia makes a range of highly portable interfaces that are simple to use and capable of professional-sounding results for people who want to record on the move, using a laptop, mobile phone or tablet. The iRig Pro Duo is one of the best and works with Mac, PC and mobile platforms. It fits in the palm of your hand and runs from either two AA batteries or via USB from whatever device it's connected to. It has two 1/4-inch mic/line inputs, a pair of outputs and a headphone socket as well as switches for 48-volt phantom power for connecting condenser mics. IK Multimedia also makes the AmpliTube modelling software, which when paired with the iRig enables you to plug in and record through a studio-quality set-up of virtual amps and effects wherever you are.

Audio-Technica AT2020USBi condenser microphone

PRICE £169 **CONTACT** www.audio-technica.com

If you're looking for a more simple method of recording at home or while out on location, Audio-Technica's AT2020USBi is an excellent plug-and-play solution. It connects directly to your laptop, tablet or phone, negating the need for an interface, and is based on the design of the company's celebrated AT2020 cardioid condenser mic with similarly high-quality sound and impressive clarity. It features a headphone output for monitoring, fader to balance the mic signal with the playback level, tripod desk stand and three-metre USB cable.

KRK KNS 8400 studio headphones

PRICE £99 **CONTACT** www.krksys.com

When it comes to recording, mixing and mastering your compositions, a decent set of headphones or monitor speakers will prove absolutely essential – and KRK is a company that makes both. The KNS 8400s offer a wide frequency response and accurate sound with low distortion and an extended LF response. They're also light in weight with memory foam ear and head cushions to ensure they won't become uncomfortable during long mixing sessions.

Positive Grid BIAS FX

PRICE $69 **CONTACT** www.positivegrid.com

BIAS FX is an amp and effects simulator that enables you to emulate the sounds of a whole world of amps, cabs, and effects. The Desktop version provides 12 amps and 30 effects, while Professional has 32 amps and 52 effects, plus 10 studio rack processors. The ToneCloud feature allows you to share your virtual creations online and download boards designed by other users and professional players.

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